

THE IRON PIRATE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

THE GARDEN OF SWORDS.

KRONSTADT.

A PURITAN'S WIFE.

THE IMPREGNABLE CITY.

THE SEA WOLVES.

THE LITTLE HUGUENOT.

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THE IRON PIRATE

'A Plain Tale of
Strange Happenings on the Sea

BY

MAX PEMBERTON

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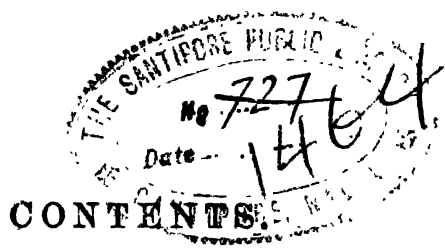
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THE IRON PIRATE.

A Plain Tale of Strange Happenings on the Sea.

CHAPTER I.

THE PERFECT FOOL ASKS A FAVOUR.

"*En voiture ! en voiture !*"

If it has not been your privilege to hear a French guard utter these words, you have lost a lesson in the dignity of elocution which nothing can replace. "*En voiture, en voiture ; five minutes for Paris.*" At the well-delivered warning, the Englishman in the adjoining buffet raises on high the frothing tankard, and vaunts before the world his capacity for deep draughts and long ; the fair American spills her coffee and looks an exclamation ; the Bishop pays for his daughter's tea, drops the change in the one chink which the buffet boards disclose, and thinks one ; the travelled person, disdaining haste, smiles on all with a pitying leer ; the foolish man, who has forgotten something, makes public his conviction that he will lose his train. The adamant official alone is at his ease, and, as the minutes go, the knell of the train-loser sounds the deeper, the horrid jargon is yet more irritating.

I thought all these things, and more, as I waited for the Perfect Fool at the door of my carriage in the harbour station at Calais. He was truly an impossible man, that small-eyed, short-haired, stooping mystery I had met at Cowes a month before, and formed so strange a friendship with. To-day he would do this, to-morrow he would not ; to-day he had a theory that the world was egg-shaped, to-morrow he believed it to be round ; in one moment he was hot upon a journey to St. Petersburg, in the next he felt that the Pacific islands offered a better opportunity. If he had a second coat, no man had ever seen it ; if he had a purpose in life, no man, I hold, had ever known it. And yet there was a fascination about him you could not resist ; in his visible, palpitating, stultifying folly there was something so amazing that you drew to the man as to that unknown something which the world had not yet given to you, as a treasure to be worn daily in the privacy of your own enjoyment. I had, as I have said, picked the Perfect Fool up at Cowes, whither I had taken my yacht, *Celms*, for the Regatta Week ; and he had clung to me ever since with a dogged obstinacy that was a triumph. He had taken of my bread and eaten of my salt unasked ; he was not a man such as the men I knew—he was interested in nothing, not even in himself—and yet I tolerated him. And in return for this toleration he was about to make me lose a train for Paris.

"*WILL YOU COME ON ?*" I roared for the tenth time, as the cracked bell jangled and the guards hoisted the last stout person into the only carriage where there was not a seat for her. "Don't you see we shall be left behind ! Hurry up ! Hang

your parcels ! Now then—for the last time, Hall, Hill, Hull, whatever your con-founded name is, are you coming ? ”

Many guards gave a hand to the hoist, and the Perfect Fool fell upon his hat-box, which was all the personal property he seemed to possess. He apologised to Mary, who sat in the far corner, with more grace than I had looked for from him, woke Roderick, who was in his fifth sleep since luncheon, and then gathered the remnants of himself into a coherent whole.

“ Did anyone use my name ? ” he asked gravely, and as one offended. “ I thought I heard someone call me Hull ? ”

“ Exactly ; I think I called you every name in the Directory, but I’m glad you answer to one of them. ”

“ Yes, and I tell you what,” said Roderick, “ I wish you wouldn’t come into a railway carriage on your hands and knees, waking a fellow up every time he tries to get a minute to himself ; I don’t speak for myself, but for my sister. ”

The Perfect Fool made a profound bow to Mary, who looked very pretty in her dainty yachting dress—she was only sixteen, I had known her all her life—and he said, “ I cannot make your sister an apology worthy of her. ”

“ If that isn’t a shame, Mr. Hall,” replied the blushing girl. “ I never go to sleep in railway carriages. ”

“ No, of course you don’t,” said Roderick, as he made himself comfortable for another nap, “ but you may go to sleep in a railway carriage ; ” then with a grunt, “ Wake me up at Amiens, old man,” he sank to slumber.

The train moved slowly over the sandy marsh which lies between Calais and Boulogne, and the rapid talk of the railway carriage held us to Amiens, and after. During the second half of the long journey Roderick was asleep, and Mary’s pretty head had fallen against the cushion as the swing of the carriage gave the direct negative to her words at Calais station. At last, even the maker of commonplaces was silent ; and, as I reclined at greater length on the cushions of the stuffy compartment, I thought how strange a company we were then being carried over the dull, drear pasture-land of France, to the lights, the music, and the life of the great capital. Of the man Martin Hall—I remembered his true name in the moments of repose—I knew nothing beyond that which I have told you ; but of my friends Roderick and Mary, accompanying me on this wildaway journey, I knew all that was to be known. Roderick and I had been at Caius College, Cambridge, together, friends drawn the closer in affection because our conditions in kith and kin, in possession and in purpose, in ambition and in idleness, were so very like. Roderick was an orphan twenty-four years of age, young, rich, desiring to know life before he measured strength with her, caring for no man, not vital enough to realise danger, an Englishman in tenacity of will, a good fellow, a gentleman. His sister was his only care. He gave to her the strength of an undivided love, and just as, in the shallowness of much of his life, there was matter for blame, so in this increasing affection and thought for the one very dear to him was there the strength of a strong manhood and a noble work.

For myself, I was twenty-five when the strange things of which I am about to write happened to me. Like Roderick, I was an orphan. My father had left me £50,000, which I drew upon when I was of age ; but, shame that I should write it, I had spent more than £40,000 in four years, and my schooner, the *Celsis*, with some few thousand pounds, alone remained to me. Of what was my future to be, I knew not. In the senseless purpose of my life, I said only, “ It will come, the tide in my affairs which taken at the flood should lead on to fortune. ” And in this supreme folly I lived the days, now in the Mediterranean, now cruising round the coast of England, now flying of a sudden to Paris with one they might have called a vulgarian, but one I chose to know. A journey fraught with folly, the child of folly, to end in folly, so might it have been said ; but who can foretell the supreme moments of our lives, when unknowingly we stand on the threshold of action ? And who should expect me to foresee that the man who was to touch the spring of my life’s action sat before me—mocked of me, dubbed the Perfect Fool—over whose

dead body I was to tread the paths of danger and the intricate ways of strange adventure?

But I would not weary you with more of these facts than are absolutely necessary for the understanding of this story, surpassing strange, which I judge it to be as much my duty as my privilege to write. Let us go back to the Gare du Nord, and the compartment wherein Mary and Roderick slept, while the Perfect Fool and I faced each other, surfeited with meteorological observations, sick to weariness with reflections upon the probability of being late or arriving before time. I would well have been silent and dozed as the others were doing; of a truth, I had done so had it not become very evident that the man who had begun to bore me wished at last to say something, relating neither to the weather nor to the speed of our train. His restless manner, the fidgeting of his hands with certain papers which he had taken from his great-coat pocket, the shifting of the small grey eyes, marked that within him which suffered not show except in privacy; and I waited for him, making pretence of interest in the great plain of hedgeless pasture-land which bordered the track on each side. At last he spoke, and, speaking, seemed to be the Perfect Fool no longer.

"They're both asleep, aren't they?" he asked suddenly, as he put his hand, which seemed to tremble, upon my arm, and pointed to the sleepers. "Would you mind making sure—quite sure—before I speak?—that is, if you will let me, for I have a favour to ask."

To see the man grave and evidently concerned was to me so unusual that for the moment I looked at him rather than at Roderick or Mary, and waited to know if the gravity were not of his humour and not of any deeper import. A single glance at him convinced me for the second time that I did him wrong. He was looking at me with a fitful pleading look unlike anything he had shown previously. In answer to his request I assured him at once that he might speak his mind; that, even if Roderick should overhear us, I would pledge my word for his good faith. Then only did he unbosom himself and tell me freely what he had to say.

"I wanted to speak to you some days ago," he said earnestly and quickly, as his hands continued to play with the paper, "but we have been so much occupied that I have never found the occasion. It must seem curious in your eyes that I, who am quite a stranger to you, should have been in your company for some weeks, and should not have told you more than my name. As the thing stands, you have been kind enough to make no inquiries; if I am an impostor, you do not care to know it; if I am a rascal hunted by the law, you have not been willing to help the law; you do not know if I have money or no money, a home or no home, people or no people, yet you have made me—shall I say, a friend?"

He asked the question with such a gentle inflexion of the voice that I felt a softer chord was touched, and in response I shook hands with him. After that he continued to speak.

"I am very grateful for all your trust, believe me, for I am a man that has known few friends in life, and I have not cared to go out of my way to seek them. You have given me your friendship unasked, and it is the more prized. What I wanted to say is this, if I should die before three days have passed, will you open this packet of papers I have prepared and sealed for you, and carry out what is written there as well as you are able? It is no idle request, I assure you; it is one that will put you in the place where I now stand, with opportunities greater than I dare to think of. As for the dangers, they are big enough, but you are the man to overcome them as I hope to overcome them—if I live!"

The sun fell over the lifeless scene without as he ceased to speak. I could see a crimson beam glowing upon a crucifix that stood on the wayside by the hill-foot yonder; but the cheerless monotony of plough land and of pasture, stretching away leafless, treeless, without bud or flower, herd or herdsman, church or cottage, to the shadowed horizon, looming dark as the twilight deepened, was in sympathy with the gloom which had come upon me as Martin Hall ceased to speak. I had thought the man a fool and witless, flighty in purpose and shallow in thought, and yet he seemed

to speak of great mysteries—and of death. In one moment the jester's cloak fell from him, and I saw the mail beneath. He had made a great impression upon me, but I concealed it from him, and replied jauntily and with no show of gravity—

"Tell me, are you quite certain that you are not talking nonsense?"

He replied by asking me to take his hand. I took it—it was chill with the icy cold as of death; and I doubted his meaning no more, but determined to have the whole mystery, then so faintly sketched, laid bare before me.

"If you are not playing the fool, Hall," said I, "and if you are sincere in wishing me to do something which you say is a favour to you, you must be more explicit. In the first place, how did you get this absurd notion that you are going to die into your head? secondly, what is the nature of the obligation you wish to put upon me? It is quite clear that I can't accept a trust about which I know nothing, and I think that for undiluted vagueness your words deserve a medal. Let us begin at the beginning, which is a very good place to begin at. Now, why should you, who are going to Paris, as far as I know, simply as a common sightseer, have any reason to fear some mysterious calamity in a city where you don't know a soul?"

He laughed softly, looking out for a moment on the sunless fields, but his eyes flashed lights when he answered me, and I saw that he clenched his hands so that the nails pierced the flesh.

"Why am I going to Paris without aim, do you say? Without aim—I, who have waited years for the work I believe that I shall accomplish to-night—why am I going to Paris? Ha! I will tell you: I am going to Paris to meet one who, before another year has gone, will be wanted by every Government in Europe; who, if I do not put my hand upon his throat in the midst of his foul work, will make graves as thick as pines in the wood there before you know another month; one who is mad and who is sane, one who, if he knew my purpose, would crush me as I crush this paper; one who has everything that life can give and seeks more, a man who has set his face against humanity, and who will make war on the nations, who has money and men, who can command and be obeyed in ten cities, against whom the police might as well hope to fight as against the white wall of the South Sea; a man of purpose so deadly that the wisest in crime would not think of it—a man, in short, who is the product of culminating vice—him I am going to meet in this Paris where I go without aim—without aim, ha!"

"And you mean to run him down?" I asked, as his voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and the drops stood as beads on his brow; "what interest have you in him?"

"At the moment none; but in a month the interest of money. As sure as you and I talk of it now, there will be fifty thousand pounds offered for knowledge of him before December comes upon us!"

I looked at him as at one who dreams dreams, but he did not flinch.

"You meet the man in Paris?" I went on.

"To-night I shall be with him," he answered; "within three days I win all or lose all: for his secret will be mine. If I fail, it is for you to follow up the thread which I have unravelled by three years' hard work—"

"What sort of person do you say he is?" I continued, and he replied—

"You shall see for yourself. Dare you risk coming with me—I meet him at eight o'clock?"

"Dare I risk!—pooh, there can't be much danger."

"There is every danger—but, so, the girl is waking!"

It was true; Mary looked up suddenly as we thundered past the fortifications of Paris, and said, as people do, say in such circumstances, "Why, I believe I've been asleep!" Roderick shook himself like a great bear, and asked if we had passed Chantilly; the Perfect Fool began his banter, and roared for a cab as the lights of the station twinkled in the semi-darkness. I could scarce believe, as I watched his antics, that he was the man who had spoken to me of great mysteries ten minutes before. Still less could I convince myself that he had not many days to live. So are the fatal things of life hidden from us.

CHAPTER II.

I MEET CAPTAIN BLACK.

THE lights of Paris were very bright as we drove down the Boulevard des Capucines, and drew up at length at the Hôtel Scriba, which is by the Opera House. Mary uttered a hundred exclamations of joy as we passed through the city of lights; and Roderick, who loved Paris, condescended to keep awake!

"I'll tell you what," he exclaimed, after a period of profound reflection, "the beauty of this place is that no one thinks here, except about cooking, and after all, cooking is one of the first things worthy of serious speculation, isn't it? Suppose we plan a nice little dinner for four?"

"For two, my dear fellow, if you please," said Hall, with mock of state—he was quite the Perfect Fool again. "Mr. Mark Strong condescends to dine with me, and in that utter unselfishness of character peculiar to him insists on paying the bill—don't you, Mr. Mark?"

I answered that I did, and, be it known, I was the Mark Strong referred to.

"The fact is, Roderick," I explained, "that I made a promise to meet one of Mr. Hall's friends to-night, so you and Mary must dine alone. You can then go to sleep, don't you see, or take Mary out and buy her something."

"Yes, that would be splendid, Roderick," cried Mary, all the girlish excitement born of Paris strong upon her. "Let's go and buy a hundred things"—Roderick groaned—"but I wish, Mark, you weren't going to leave us on our first night here; you know what you said only yesterday!"

"What did I say yesterday?"

"That there were a lot of bounders in Paris—and I want to see them bound!"

I consoled her by telling her that bounders never made display after six o'clock, and assured her that Roderick had long confessed to me his intention to buy her the best hat in Paris, at which Roderick muttered exclamations for my ear only. By that time we were at the Hôtel, and the Perfect Fool had much to say.

"Could any gentleman oblige me with the time, English or French?" he asked; "my watch is so moved at the situation in which it finds itself that it is fourteen hours too slow."

I told him that it was ten minutes to eight, and the information quickened him.

"Ten minutes to eight, and half-a-dozen Russian princes, to say nothing of an English knight, to meet; so ho, my toilet must remain! Could anyone oblige me with a comb, fragmentary or whole?"

He continued his banter as we mounted the stairs of the cozy little hotel, whose windows overlook the core of the great throbbing heart of Paris, and so until we were alone in my room, whither he had followed me.

"Quick's the word," he said, as he shut the door, and took several articles from his hat-box, "and no more palaver. One pair of spectacle, one wig, one set of curiosities to sell—do I look like a second-hand dealer in odd lots, or do I not, Mr. Mark Strong?"

I had never seen such an utter change in any man made with such little show. The Perfect Fool was no longer before me; there was in his place a lounging, shady-looking, greed-haunted Hebrew. The haunching of the shoulders was perfect; the stoop, the walk, were triumphs. But he gave me little opportunity to inspect him or to ask for what reason he had thus disguised himself.

"It's five minutes from here," he said, "and the clocks are going eight—you are right as you are, for you are a cipher in the affair yet, and don't run the danger I run—now come!"

He passed down the stairs with this blunt invitation, and I followed him. So good was his disguise and make-pretence that the others, who were in the narrow hall, drew back to let him go, not recognising him, and spoke to me, asking what I

had done with him. Then I pointed to the new Perfect Fool, and without another word of explanation went on into the street.

We walked in silence for some little distance, keeping by the Opera, and so through to the broad Boulevard Haussmann. Thence he turned, crossing the busy thoroughfare, and passing through the Rue Joubert, stopped quite suddenly at last in the mouth of a *cul-de-sac* which opened from the narrow street. He had something to say to me, and he gave it with quick words prompted by a quick and serious wit, for he had put off the rôle of the jester at the hotel.

"This is the place," he said; "up here on the third, and there isn't much time for talk. Just this; you're my man, you carry this box of metal"—he meant the case of curiosities—"and don't open your mouth, unless you get the fool in you and want the taste of a six-inch knife. That's my risk, and I haven't brought you here to share it; so mum's the word, mum, mum, mum; and keep a hold on your eyes, whatever you see or whatever you hear. Do I look all right?"

"Perfectly—but just a word; if we are going into some den where we may have a difficulty in getting out again, wouldn't it be as well to go armed?"

"Armed!—pish!"—and he looked unutterable contempt, treading the passage with long strides, and entering a house at the far end of it.

Thither I followed him, still wondering, and passing the concierge found myself at last on the third floor, before a door of thick oak. Our first knocking upon this had no effect, but at the second attempt, and while he was pulling his hat yet more upon his eyes, I heard a great rolling voice which seemed to echo on the stairway, and so leapt from flight to flight, almost like the rattle of a cannon-shot with its many reverberations. For the moment indistinct, I then became aware that the voice was that of a man singing and walking at the same time, and seemingly in no hurry to give us admission, for he passed from room to room bellowing this refrain, and never varying it by so much as a single word:—

"There was a man of Boston town,
With his pistols three,
With his pistols three, three, three;
And never a skunk in Boston town
That he didn't chaw but me!"

When the noise stopped at last, there was silence, complete and unbroken, for at least five minutes, during which time Hall stood motionless, waiting for the door to be opened. After that we heard a great yell from the same voice, with the words, "Ahoy, Splinters, shift along the gear, will you?" and then Splinters, whoever he might be, was cursed in unchosen phrases as the son of all the lubbers that ever crowded a fo'cas'le. A mumbled discussion seemed to tread on the heels of the hullabaloo, when, apparently having arranged the "gear" to satisfaction, the man stalked to the door, singing once more in stentorian tones:

"There was a man of Boston town,
With his pistols three,
With his pistols —"

"Hullo—the darned little Jew and his kickshaws; why, matey, so early in the morning?"

The exclamation came as he saw us, putting his head round the door, and showing one arm swathed all up in dirty red flannel. He was no sort of a man to look at, as the Scots say, for his head was a mass of dirty yellow hair, and his face did not seem to have known an ablution for a week. But there was an ugly jocular look about his rabbit-like eyes, and a great mark cut clean into the side of his face, which were a fit decoration for the red-burnt, pitted, and horribly repulsive countenance he betrayed. His leer, too, as he greeted Hall, was the evil leer of a man whose laugh makes those hearing hush with the horror of it; and, on my part, forgetting the warning, I looked at him and drew back repelled. This he saw, and

with a flush and a display of one great stump of a tooth which protuded on his left lip, he turned on me.

"And who may you be, matey, that you don't go for to shake hands with Roaring John? Dip me in brine, if you was my son I'd dress you down with a two-foot bar. Why don't you teach the little Hebrew manners, old Josfos? but there," and this he said as he opened the door wider, "so long as our skipper will have to do with shiners to sell and land barnacles, what ken you look for?—walk right along here."

The room indicated opened from a small hall, for the place was built after the Parisian fashion—akin to that of our flats—and was a house in itself. The man who called himself "Roaring John" entered the apartment before us, bawling at the top of his voice, "Josfos, the Jew, and his pardner come aboard!" and then I found myself in the strangest company and the strangest place I have ever set eyes on. So soon as I could see things clearly through the hanging atmosphere of tobacco smoke and heavy vapour, I made out the forms of six or eight men, not sitting as men usually do in a place where they eat, but squatting on their haunches by a series of low narrow tables, which were, on closer inspection, nothing but planks put upon bricks, and laid round the four sides of the apartment. Of other furniture there did not seem to be a vestige in the place, save such as pertained to the necessities of eating and sleeping. Each man lolled back on his own pile of dirty pillows and dirtier blankets; each had before him a great metal drinking-cup, a coarse knife, which I found was for hacking meat, long rolls of plug tobacco, and a small red bundle, which I doubt not was his portable property. Each, too, was dressed exactly as his fellow, in a coarse red shirt, seamen's trousers of ample blue serge, a belt with a clasp-knife about his waist, and each had some bauble of a bracelet on his arm, and some strange rings upon his fingers. In the first amazement at seeing such an assembly in the heart of civilised Paris, I did no more than glean a general impression, but that was a powerful one—the impression that I saw men of all ages from twenty-five years upwards; men marked by time as with long service on the sea; men scarred, burnt, some with traces of great cuts and slashes received on the open face; men fierce-looking as painted devils, with teeth, with none, with four fingers to the hand, with three; men whose laugh was a horrid growl like the tumult of imprisoned passions, whose threats chilled the heart to hear, whose very words seemed to poison the air, who made the great room like a cage of beasts, ravenous and ill-seeking. This and more was my first thought, as I asked myself, into what hovel of vice have I fallen, by what mischance have I come on such a company?

Martin Hall seemed to have no such ill opinion of the men, and put himself at his ease the moment we entered. I had, indeed, believed for the moment that he had brought me there with evil intent, distrusting the man who was yet little more than a stranger to me; but recalling all that passed, his disguise, his evident fear, I put the suspicion from me, and listened to him, more content, as he made his way to the top of the room and stood before one who forced from me individual notice, so strange-looking was he, and so deep did the respect which all paid him appear to be. We shall meet this man often in our travels together, you and I, my friends, so a few words, if you please, about him. He sat at the head of the rude table, as I have said, but not as the others sat, on pillows and blankets, for there was a pile of rich-looking skins—bear, tiger, and white wolf—beneath him, and he alone of all the company wore black clothes and a white shirt. He was a short man, I judged, black-bearded and smooth-skinned, with a big nose, almost an intellectual forehead, small, white-looking hands, all ablaze with diamonds, about whose fine quality there could not be two opinions; and, what was even more remarkable, there hung as a pendant to his watch-chain a great uncut ruby which must have been worth five thousand pounds. One trademark of the sea alone did he possess, in the dark, curly ringlets which fell to his shoulders, matted there as long uncombed, but typical in all of the man. This then was the fellow upon whose every word that company of ruffians appeared to hang, who obeyed him, as I observed presently, when he did so much as lift his hand, who seemed to have in their uncouth way a veneration for him,

inexplicable, remarkable—the man of whom Martin Hall had painted such a fantastic picture, who was, as I had been told, soon to be wanted by every Government in Europe. And so I faced him for the first time, little thinking that before many months had gone I should know of deeds by his hand which had set the world aflame with indignation, deeds which carried me to strange places, and among dangers so terrible that I shudder when the record brings back their reality.

Hall was the first to speak, and it was evident to me that he cloaked his own voice, putting on the nasal twang and the manner of an East-end Jew dealer.

"I have come, Mister Black, he said, "as you was good enough to wish, with a few little thing—beautiful things—which cost me moosh money——"

"Ho, ho!" song out Captain Black, "here is a Jew who paid *much* money for a few little things! Look at him, boys!—the Jew with much money! Turn out his pockets, boys!—the Jew with much money! Ho, ho! Bring the Jew some drink, and the little Jew, by thunder!"

His merriment set all the company roaring to his mood. For a moment their play was far from innocent, for one lighted a great sheet of paper and burnt it under the nose of my friend, while another pushed his dirty drinking-pot to my mouth, and would have forced me to drink. But I remembered Hall's words, and held still, giving banter for banter—only this, I learnt to my intense surprise that the pot did not contain beer but champagne, and that, by its bouquet, of an infinitely fine quality. In what sort of a company was I, then, where mere seamen wore diamond rings and drank fine champagne from pewter pots?

The unpleasant and rough banter ceased on a word from Captain Black, who called for lights, which were brought—rough, ready-made oil flares, stuck in jugs and pots—and Hall gathered up his trinkets and proceeded to lay them out with the well-simulated cunning of the trader.

"That, Mister Black," he said, putting a miniature of exquisite finish against the white fur on the floor, "is a portrait of the Emperor Napoleon, sometime in the possession of the Empress Josephine; that is a gold chain—he was eighteen carat—once the property of Don Carlos; here is the pen with which Francis Drake wrote his last letter to the Queen Elizabeth—beautiful goods as ever was, and cost moosh money!"

"To the dead with your much money," said the Captain with an angry gesture, as he snatched the trinkets from him, and eyed them to my vast surprise with the air of a practised connoisseur; "let's handle the stuff, and don't gibber. How much for this?" He held up the miniature, and admiration betrayed itself in his eyes.

"He was painted by Sir William Ross, and I sell him for two hundred pounds, my Captain. Not a penny less, or I'm a ruined man!"

"The Jew a ruined man! Hark at him! Four-Eyes"—this to a great lanky fellow who lay asleep in the corner—"the little Jew can't sell 'em under two hundred, I reckon; oh, certainly not; why, of course. Here you, Splinters, pay him for a thick-skinned, thieving shark, and give him a hundred for the others."

The boy Splinters, who was a black lad, seemingly about twelve years old, came up at the word, and took a great canvas bag from a hook on the wall. He counted three hundred gold pieces on the floor—pieces of all coinages in Europe and America, as they appeared to be by their faces, and Hall, who had squatted like the others, picked them up. Then he asked a question, while the little black lad, who bore a look of suffering on his worn face, stood waiting the Captain's word.

"Mister Captain, I shall have waiting for me at Plymouth to-morrow a relic of the great John Hawkins, which, as I'm alive, you shouldn't miss. I have heard them say that it is the very sword with which he cut the Spaniards' beards. Since you have told me that you sail to-morrow, I have thought, if you put me on your ship across to Plymouth, I could show you the goods, and you shall have them cheap—beautiful goods, if I lose by them."

Now, instead of answering this appeal as he had done the others, with his great guffaw and banter, Captain Black turned upon Hall as he made his request, and his face lit up with passion. I saw that his eyes gave one fiery look, while he clenched

his fists as though to strike the man as he sat, but then he restrained himself. Yet, had I been Hall, I would not have faced such another glance for all that adventure had given me. It was a look which meant ill—all the ill that one man could mean to another.

"You want to come aboard my boat, do you?" drawled the Captain, as he softened his voice to a fine tone of sarcasm. "The dealer wants a cheap passage; so-ho, what do you say, Four-Eyes; shall we take the man aboard?"

Four-Eyes sat up deliberately, and struck himself on the chest several times as though to knock the sleep out of him. He seemed to be a brawny, thick-set Irishman, gigantic in limb, and with a more honest countenance than his fellows. He wore a short pea-jacket over the dirty red shirt, and a great pair of carpet slippers in place of the sea-boots which many of the others displayed. His hair was light and curly, and his eyes, keen-looking and large, were of a grey-blue and not unkindly-looking. I thought him a man of some deliberation, for he stared at the Captain and at Hall before he answered the question put to him, and then he drank a full and satisfying draught from the cup before him. When he did give reply, it was in a rich rolling voice, a luxurious voice which would have given ornament to the veriest commonplace.

"O'd take him aboard, bedad," he shouted, leaning back as though he had spoken wisdom, and then he nodded to the Captain, and the Captain nodded to him.

The understanding seemed complete.

"We sail at midnight, tide serving," said the Captain, as he picked up the miniature and the other things; "you can come aboard when you like—here, boy, lock these in the chest."

The boy put out his hand to take the things, but in his fear or his clumsiness, he dropped the miniature, and it cracked upon the floor. The mishap gave me my first real opportunity of judging these men in the depth of their ruffianism. As the lad stood quivering and terror-struck, Black turned upon him, almost foaming at the lips.

"You clumsy young cub, what d'ye mean by that?" he asked; and then, as the boy fell on his knees to beg for mercy, casting one pitiful look towards me—a look I shall not soon forget—he kicked him with his foot, crying—

"Here, give him a dozen with your strap, one of you."

He had but to say the words, when a colossal brute seized the boy in his grip, and held his head down to the table board, while another, no more gentle, stripped his shirt off, and struck him blow after blow with the great buckle, so that the flesh was torn while the blood trickled upon the floor. The brutal act stirred the others to a fine merriment, yet for myself, I had all the will to spring up and grip the striker as he stood, but Hall, who had covered my hand with his, held it so surely, and with such prodigious strength, that my fingers almost cracked. It was the true sign-manual for me to say nothing, and I realised how hopeless such a struggle would be, and turned my head that I should not see the cruel thing to the end.

When the lad fainted they gave him a few kicks with their heavy boots, and he lay like a log on the floor, until the ruffian named "Roaring John" picked him up and threw him into the next room. The incident was forgotten at once, and Captain Black became quite merry.

"Bring in the victuals, you John," he said, "and let Dick say us a grace; he's been doing nothing but drink these eight hours."

Dick, a red-haired, penetrating-looking Scotsman, who carried the economy of his race even to the extent of flesh, of which he was sparse, greeted the reproof by casting down his eyes into the empty can before him.

"Is a body to cheer himself wi' naething?" he asked; "not wi' a bit food and drink after twa days' toil? It's an unreasonable man ye are, Mister Black, an' I dinna ken if I'll remain another hoor as meenister to yer vessel."

"Ho, ho, Dick the Ranter sends in his resignation; listen to that, boys," said the Captain, who had found his humour again. "Dick will not serve the

honourable company any longer. Ho, swear for the strangers, Dick, and let 'em hear your tongue."

The man, rascal and ill-tongued as I doubt not he was at times, refused to comply with the demand as the food at length was put upon the table. It was rich food, stews, with a profuse display of oysters, chickens, boiled, roast, à la maître d'hôtel, fine French trifles, pasties, ices—and it was to be washed down, I saw, by draughts from magnums of Pommery and Greno. I was, at this stage, so well accustomed to the scene that the novelty of a company of dirty, repulsive-looking seamen banqueting in this style did not surprise me one whit, only I wished to be away from a place whose atmosphere poisoned me, and where every word seemed garnished with some horrible oath. I whispered this thought to Hall, and he said, "Yes," and rose to go, but the Captain pulled him back, crying—

"What, little Jew, you wouldn't eat at other people's cost! Down with it, man, down with it; fill your pockets, stuff 'em to the top. Let's see you laugh, old wizen-face, a great sixty per cent. croak coming from your very boots—here, you, John, give the man who hasn't got any money some more drink; make him take a draught."

The men were becoming warmed with the stuff they had taken, and furiously offensive. One of them held Hall while the others forced champagne down his throat, and the man "Roaring John" attempted to pay me a similar compliment, but I struck the cup from his hand, and he drew a knife, turning on me. The action was foolish, for in a moment a tumult ensued. I heard fierce cries, the smash of overturned boards and lights, and remembered no more than some terrific blows delivered with my left, as Molt of Cambridge taught me, a sharp pain in my right shoulder as a knife went home, the voice of Hall crying, "Make for the door—the door," and the great yell of Captain Black above the others. His word, no doubt, saved us from greater harm; for when I had thought that my foolhardiness had undone us, and that we should never leave the place alive, I found myself in the Rue Joubert with Hall at my side, he torn and bleeding as I was, but from a slight wound only.

"That was near ending badly," he said, looking at the skin-deep cut on my shoulder. "They're wild enough sober, but Heaven save anyone from them when they're the other way!"

I looked at him steadily for a moment; then I asked—

"Hall, what does it mean? Who are these men, and what business carries you amongst them?"

"That you'll learn when you open the papers; but I don't think you will open them yet, for I'm going to succeed." He was gay almost to frivolity once more. "Did you hear him ask me to sail with him from Dieppe to-morrow?"

"I did, and I believe you're fool enough to go. Did you see the look he gave you when he said 'Yes'?"

"Never mind his look. I must risk that and more, as I have risked it many a time. Once aboard his yacht I shall have the key which will unlock six feet of rope for that man, or you may call me the Fool again."

It was light with the roseate, warm light of a late summer's dawn as we reached the hotel. Paris slept, and the stillness of her streets greeted the life-giving day, while the grey mist floated away before the scattered sunbeams, and the houses stood clear-cut in the finer air. I was hungry for sleep, and too tired to think more of the strange dream-like scene I had witnessed; but Hall followed me to my bedroom and had yet a word to say.

"Before we part—we may not meet again for some time, for I leave Paris in a couple of hours—I want to ask you to do me yet one more service. Your yacht is at Calais, I believe—will you go aboard this morning and take her round to Plymouth? There ask for news of the American's yacht—he has only hired her, and she is called *La France*. News of the yacht will be news of me, and I shall be glad to think that someone is at my back in this big risk. If you should

not hear of me, wait a month ; but if you get definite proof of my death, break the seal of the papers you hold and read—but I don't think it will come to that."

So saying, he left me with a hearty handshake. Poor fellow, I did not know then that I should break the seal of his papers within three days.

CHAPTER III.

"FOUR-EYES" DELIVERS A MESSAGE.

A WARMING glare of the fuller sun upon my eyes, the cracking of whips, the shouting of fierce-lunged coachmen, the hum of moving morning life in the city, stirred me from a deep sleep as the clocks struck ten. I sat up in bed, uncertain in the effort of wit-gathering if night had not given me a dream rather than an experience, a chance play of the brain's imagining, and not a living knowledge of true scenes and strange men. For in this mood does nature often play with us, tricking us to fine thoughts as we lie dreaming, or creating such shows of life as we slumber, that in our first moments of wakefulness we do not detect the cheat or reckon with the phantoms. I knew not for some while, as I lay back listening to the hum of busy Paris, if the Perfect Fool had or had not told me anything, if we had gone together to a house near the Rue Joubert, or if we had remained in the hotel, if he had begged of me some favour, or if I had dreamed it. All was but a confused mind-picture, changing as a kaleidoscope, blurred, shadowy. It might have remained so long, had I not, looking about the room, become aware that a letter, neatly folded, lay on the small table at my bedside. It was the letter which brought the consciousness of reality ; and in that moment I knew that I had not dreamed but lived the curious events of the night. But these are the words which Martin Hall wrote :—

"Hôtel Scribe. Seven a.m.—I leave in ten minutes, and write you here my last word. We shall sail from Dieppe at midnight. Do not forget to cross to Plymouth if you have any friendship for me. I look to you alone.—MARTIN HALL."

He had left Paris then, and set out upon his great risk. The man's awe-inspiring courage, his immense self-reliance, his deep purpose, were marked strongly in those few simple words, and I had never felt so great an admiration for him. He looked to me alone, and assuredly he should not look in vain. I would follow him to Plymouth, losing no moment in the act ; and I resolved then to go farther if the need should be, and to search for him in every land and on every sea, for he was a brave man whose like I had not often known.

I dressed in haste with this intention, and went to déjeuner in our private room below. Roderick was there, sleepy over his bottle of bad Bordeaux, and Mary, who insisted on taking an English breakfast, was in the height of a dissertation on Parisian tea.

"Did you ever see anything so feeble ?" she said, being fond of Roderick's speech mannerisms, and often mimicking them. "Isn't it pretty awful ?" and she poured some from her spoon.

"'Pretty awful' is not the expression for a polite young woman," replied Roderick, with a severe yawn ; "anyone who comes to Paris for tea deserves what he gets."

"Yes, and what he gets 'takes the biscuit.'"

"Mary!"

"Well, you always say, 'takes the biscuit: ' why shouldn't I?"

"Because, my child, because," said Roderick, slowly and paternally, "because—why, here's Mark. Hallo! you're a pretty fellow; I hope you enjoyed yourself last night."

"Exceedingly, thanks; in fact I may say that I had a most delightful evening with men who suited me to the—tea—thank you, Mary! I'll take a cup—and now tell me, what has he brought you?"

I thought that a judicious policy of dissimulation was the wise course at that time, for I had not then determined to share my secret even with Roderick, as, indeed, by my word I was bound not to do until Hall should so wish. In this intent I hid all my serious mood, and continued the pleasant chatter.

Mary had soon poured out a cup of the decoction which Frenchmen call tea, an aqueous product, the fluid of chopped hay long stewed in tepid water, and then she answered—

"Let me see, now, what did Roderick buy me? Oh, yes! I remember, he bought me a meerschaum pipe and a walking-stick!"

"A what?" I gasped.

"A meerschaum pipe, and a walking-stick with a little man to hold matches on the top of it."

Roderick looked guilty, and admitted it.

"You see," he said in apology, "they sold only those things at the first place we came to, and you don't expect a fellow to walk in Paris, do you? Now, when I've rested after breakfast, I suggest that we all make up our minds for a long stroll, and get to the Palais Royal."

"Well, that's about three hundred yards from here, isn't it? Are you quite sure you're equal to it?"

He looked at me reproachfully.

"You don't want a man to kill himself on his holiday, do you? You're fatally energetic. Now, I believe that the science of life is rest, the calm survey of great problems from the depths of an armchair. It's astonishing how easy things are if you take them that way; never let anything agitate you—I never do."

"No, he don't, does he, Mary? But about this excursion to the Palais Royal; I'm afraid you'll have to go alone, for I have just had a letter which calls me back to the yacht. It's awfully unfortunate, but I must go, although I will return here in a week, if possible, and pick you up; otherwise, you will hear of my movements as soon as I know them myself."

Somewhat to my astonishment, they both looked at me, saying nothing, but evidently very surprised. Mary's big eyes were wide open with amazement, but Roderick had a more serious look on his face. He did not question me, he did not say a word, but I felt his thought—"You hold something back"—and the mute reproach was keen. Perhaps some explanation would then have been demanded had not another interruption broken the unwelcome silence. One of the servants of the hotel entered to tell me that a man who wished to speak with me was waiting outside, and asked if I would see him there or in the privacy of our room. As I could not recall that anyone in Paris had any business with me, I said, "Send the man here;" and presently he entered, when to my intense surprise I found him to be no other than one of the ruffians—the one called "Four-Eyes" by the Captain of the company I had met on the previous evening. Not that he seemed in any way abashed at the meeting—he walked into the room with a seaman's lurch, and steadied himself only when he saw Mary. Then he rang an imaginary bell-rope on his forehead, and "hitched" himself together, as sailors say, looking for all the world like some great dog that has entered a house where dogs are forbidden. His first words were somewhat unexpected—

"Oi was priest's boy in Tipperary, bedad," said he, and then he looked round as if that information should put him on good terms with us.

"Will you sit down, please?" was my request as he stood fingering his hat, and

looking at Mary as though he had seen a vision, "and permit me to ask what the fact of your serving a priest in Ireland has to do with your presence here now?"

"That brings us to the point av it, and thanking yer honor, it's meself that ain't aisy on them land-craft which don't carry me cargo on an even keel at all, so I'll be standin' with no offence to the Missy, sure, an' gettin' to the writin' which is fur yer honor's ear alone as me instructhshuns goes."

He rang the bell-rope over his right eye again, and gave me a letter, well written on good paper. I watched him as I read it, and saw that in a power of eye that was astounding, he had fixed one orb upon Mary and one upon the ceiling, and that the two objects shared his gaze, while his body swayed as though he was unaccustomed to balance himself upon a fair floor. But I read his letter, and write it for you here—

"Captain Black presents his compliments to Mr. Mark Strong, whom he had the pleasure of receiving last night, and regrets the reception which was offered to him. Captain Black hopes that it will be his privilege to receive Mr. Strong on his yacht *La France*, now lying over against the American vessel *Portland*, in Dieppe harbour, at 11 to-night, and to extend to him hospitality worthy of him and his host."

Now, that was a curious thing, indeed. Not only did it appear that my pretence of being Hall's partner in trade was completely unmasked by this man of the Rue Joubert; but he had my name—and, by his tone in writing, it was clear that he knew my position, and the fact that I was no trader at all. Whether such knowledge was good for me, I could not then say; but I made up my mind to act with cunning, and to shield Hall in so far as was possible.

"Did your master tell you to wait for any answer?" I asked suddenly, as the seaman brought his right eye from the direction of the ceiling and fixed it upon me; and he said—

"Is it for the likes of me to be advisin' yer honor? 'Sure,' says he, 'if the gentleman has the moind to wroite he'll wroite, if he has the moind to come aboard me—meanin' his yacht—he'll come aboard; and we'll be swimming in liquor together as gents should. And if so be as the gentleman' (which is yer honor), says he, 'will condescend to wipe his fate on me cabin shates, let him be aboard at Dieppe afore seven bells,' says he, 'and we'll shame the ould divil with a keg, and heave at day-break'—which is yer honor's pleasure, or otherwise, as it's me juty to larn!"

It needed no very clever penetration on my part to read danger in every line of this invitation—not only danger to myself, who had been dragged by the heels into the business, but danger to Hall, whose disguise could scarce be preserved when mine was unmasked. And yet he had left Paris, and even then, perhaps, was in the power of the man Black and his crew! What I could do to help him, I could not think; but I determined if possible to glean something from the palpably cunning rogue who had come on the errand.

"I'll give you the answer to this in a minute," said I; "meanwhile, have a little whisky? A seaman like yourself doesn't thrive on cold water, does he?"

"Which is philosophy, yer honor—for could wather never warmed any man yet—me respects to the young lady"—here he looked deep into his glass, adding slowly, and as if there was credit to him in the recollection, "Oi was priest's boy in Tipperary, bedad"—and he drank the half of a stiff glass at a draught.

"Do you find this good weather in the Channel?" I inquired suddenly, looking hard at him over the table.

He made circles with his glass, and turned his eyes upon Mary, before he answered; and when he did, his voice died away like the fall of a gale which is tired. "Noice weather, did ye say—by the houly saints, it depends."

"On what?" I asked, driving the question home.

"On yer company," said he, returning my gaze, "and yer sowl."

"That's curious!"

"Yes, if ye have one to lose, and put anny price on it."

His meaning was too clear.

"Tell your master, with my compliments," I responded, "that I will come another time—I have business in Paris to-day!"

He still looked at me earnestly, and when he spoke again his voice had a fatherly ring. "If I make bold, it's yer honor's forgiveness I ask—but, if it was me that was in Paris I'd stay there," and putting his glass down quickly, he rolled to the door, fingered his hat there for one moment, put it on awry, and with the oft-repeated statement, "Oi was priest's boy in Tipperary, bedad," he swayed out of the room.

When he was gone, the others, who had not spoken, turned to me, their eyes asking for an explanation.

"One of Hall's friends," I said, trying to look unconcerned, "the mate on the yacht *La France*—the vessel he joins to-day."

Roderick tapped the table with his fingers; Mary was very white, I thought.

"He knows a queer company," I added, with a grim attempt at jocularity, "they're almost as rough as he is."

"Do you still mean to sail to-night?" asked Roderick.

"I must; I have made a promise to reach Plymouth without a moment's delay."

"Then I sail with you," said he, being very wide-awake.

"Oh, but you can't leave Paris; you promised Mary!"

"Yes, and I release him at once," interrupted Mary, the colour coming and going in her pretty cheeks. "I shall sail from Calais to-night, with you and Roderick."

"It's very kind of you—but—you see——"

"That we mean to come," added Roderick quickly. "Go and pack your things, Mary; I have something to say to Mark."

We were alone, he and I, but there was between us the first shadow that had come upon our friendship.

"Well," said he, "how much am I to know?"

"What you choose to learn, and as much as your eyes teach you—it's a promise, and I've given my word on it."

"I was sure of it. But I don't like it all the same—I distrust that fool, who seems to me a perfect madman. He'll drag you into some mess, if you'll let him. I suppose there's no danger yet or you wouldn't let Mary come!"

"There can be no risk now, be quite sure of that—we are going for a three days' cruise in the Channel, that is all."

"All you care to tell me—well, I can't ask more; what time do you start?"

"By the club train. I have two hours' work to do yet, but I will meet you at the station, if you'll bring my bag——"

"Of course—and I can rest for an hour. That always does me good in the morning."

I left him so, being myself harassed by many thoughts. The talk with Black's man did not leave me any longer in doubt that Hall had gone to great risk in setting out with the ruffian's crew; and I resolved that if by any chance it could be done, I would yet call him back to Paris. For this I went at once to the office of the Police, and laid as much of the case before one of the heads as I thought needful to my purpose. He laughed at me; the yacht *La France* was known to him as the property of an eccentric American millionaire, and he could not conceive that anyone might be in danger aboard her. As there was no hope from him, I took a fiacre and drove to the Embassy, where one of the clerks heard my whole story; and while inwardly laughing at my fears, as I could see, promised to telegraph to a friend in Calais, and get my message delivered.

I had done all in my power, and I returned to the Hôtel Scribe; but the others had left for the station. Thither I followed them, instructing a servant to come to me at the Gare du Nord if any telegram should be sent; and so reached the train, and the saloon. It was not, however, until the very moment of our departure that a messenger raced to our carriage, and thrust a paper at me; and then I knew that my warning had come too late. The paper said: "*La France* has sailed, and your friend with her."

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE SIGHT ON THE SEA.

It was on the morning of the second day; three bells in the watch; the wind playing fickle from east by south, and the sea agold with the light of an August sun. Two points west of north to starboard I saw the chalky cliffs of the Isle of Wight faint through the haze, but away ahead the Channel opened out as an unbroken sea. The yacht lay without life in her sails, the flow of the swell beating lazily upon her, and the great mainsail rocking on the boom. We had been out twenty-four hours, and had not made a couple of hundred miles. The delay angered every man aboard the *Celsis*, since every man aboard knew that it was a matter of concern to me to overtake the American yacht, *La France*, and that a life might go with long-continued failure.

As the bells were struck, and Piping Jack, our boatswain—they called him Piping Jack because he had a sweetheart in every port from Plymouth to Aberdeen, and wept every time we put to sea—piped down to breakfast, my captain betrayed his irritation by an angry sentence. He was not given to words, was Captain York, and the men knew him as "The Silent Skipper"; but twenty-four hours without wind enough to "blow a bug," as he put it, was too much for any man's temper.

"I tell you what, sir," he said, sweeping the horizon with his glass for the tenth time in ten minutes, "this American of yours has taken the breeze in his pocket, and may it blow him to—I beg your pardon, I did not see that the young lady had joined us."

But Mary was there, fresh as a rose dipped in dew, and as Roderick followed her up the companion ladder, we held a consultation, the fifth since we left Calais.

"It's my opinion," said Roderick, "that if those men of yours had not been ashore on leave, York, and we could have sailed at midnight, we should have done the business and been in Paris again by this time."

"It's my opinion, sir, that your opinion is not worth a cockroach," cried the captain quite testily; "the men have nothing to do with it. Look above; if you'll show me how to move this ship without a hatful of wind, I'll do it, sir," and he strutted off to breakfast, leaving us with Dan, the forward look-out.

Dan was a grand old seaman, and there wasn't one of us who didn't appeal to him in our difficulties.

"Do you think it means to blow, Dan?" I asked, as I offered him my tobacco-pouch; and Mary said earnestly—

"Oh, Daniel, I do wish a gale would come on!"

"Ay, Miss, and so do many of us; but we can't be making wind no more'n we can make wittals—and excusing me, Miss, it ain't Daniel, not meaning no disrespect to the other gent, whose papers were all right, I don't doubt, but my mother warn't easy in larning, and maybe didn't know of him—it's Dan, Miss, free-and-easy like, but nat'ral."

"Well, Dan, do you think it will blow? Can't you promise it will blow?"

"Lor, Miss, I'd promise ye anything; but what is nater is nater, and there's an end on it—not as I don't say there won't be a hatful o' wind afore night—why should I? but as for promisin' of it, why I'd give ye a hurricane willing—or two."

We went down to breakfast, the red of sea strength on our cheeks; and in the cosy saloon we made short work of the coffee and soles, the great heaps of toast, and the fresh fruit. I could not help some gloomy thoughts as I found myself on my own schooner again, asking how long she would be mine, and how I should suffer the loss of her when all my money was spent. These were cast off in the excitement of the chase, and came only in the moments of absolute calm, when all the men aboard fretted and fumed, and every other question was: "Isn't it beginning to blow?"

The morning passed in this way, a long morning, with the sea like a mirror, and

the sun as a great circle of red fire in the haze. Hour after hour we walked from the fore-hatch to the tiller, from the tiller to the fore-hatch, varying the exercise with a full inspection of every craft that showed above the horizon. At eight bells we lay a few miles farther westward, the island still visible to the starboard, but less distinct. At four bells, when we went to lunch, the heat was terrible below, and the sun was terrible on deck; but yet there was not a breeze. At six bells some dark and "dirty" clouds rose up from the south, and twenty hands pointed to them. At "one bell in the first do;" the clouds were thick, and the sun was hidden. Half-an-hour later there was a shrill whistling in the shrouds, and the rain began to patter on the dock, while the booms fretted, and we relieved her in part of her press of sail. When the squall struck us at last, the Channel was foaming with long lines of choppy seas; and the sky southward was dark as ink. But there was only joy of it aboard; we stood gladly as the *Celsis* heeled to it, and rising free as an unslipped hound, sent the spray flying in clouds, and dipped her decks to the foam which washed her.

During one hour, when we must have made eleven knots, the wind blew strong, and was fresh again after that; so that we set the foresail unreefed, and let the great mainsail go not many minutes later. The swift motion was an ecstasy to all of us, an unbounded delight; and even the skipper softened as we stood well out to sea, and looked on a great continent of clouds underlit with the spreading glow of the sunset, their rain setting up the mighty arched bow whose colours stood out with a rich light over the wide expanse of the east. Nor did the breeze fall, but stiffened towards night, so that in the first bell, when we came up from dinner, the *Celsis* was straining and foaming as she bent under her pressure of canvas, and it needed a sailor's foot to tread her decks. But of this no one thought, for we had hardly come above when we heard Dan hailing—

"Yacht on the port bow."

"What name?" came from twenty throats.

"*La France*," said Dan, and the words had scarce left his lips when the skipper roared the order—

"Stand by to go about!"

For some minutes the words "bout ship" were not spoken. The schooner held her course, and rapidly drew up with the yacht we had set out to seek. From the first there was no doubt about her name, which she displayed in great letters of gold above her figure-head. Dan had read them as he sighted her; and we in turn felt a thrill of delight as we proved his keen vision, watching the big cutter, for such she was, heading, not for Plymouth, but for the nearer coast. But this was not the only strange thing about her course, for when she had made some few hundred yards towards the coast, she jibbed round of a sudden, with an appalling wrench at the horse; and there being, as it appeared, no hand either at the peak halyards, or the throat halyards, the mainsail presently showed a great rent near the luff, while the foresail had torn free from the bolt-ropes of the stay, and was presenting a sorry spectacle as the yacht went about, and away towards France again.

Such a display of seamanship astounded our men.

"Close haul, you lubbers; close haul!" roared Dan, in the vain delusion that his voice would be heard a quarter of a mile away. "Keep down yer 'elm, and close haul—wash me in rum if he ain't comin' up again, and there she goes, right into it. Shake up, you gibbering fools; luff her a bit, and make fast. Did ye ever see anythin' like it this side of a Margit steamer?"

The skipper said nothing, but as the yacht luffed right up into the wind again, he groaned as a man who is hurt. Piping Jack looked sorrowful too, and said, almost with tears in his eyes—

"Axing yer pardon, sir, but hev you got a pair of eyes in your head which can make out anything unusual aboard there?"

"They're a queer lot, if that's what you mean, and they haven't got enough seamanship amongst them to run a washing tub. Is there anything else you make out?"

"A good deal, sir ; and look you, there ain't a living soul on her deck, or may I never see shore again."

"By all that's curious, you're right. There isn't a man showing !"

"'Bout slip," roared the skipper, and every man ran to his post, while I touched Captain York on the shoulder and pointed to the seemingly deserted and errant yacht.

But the skipper's eyes were not those of a ground-gazer ; he needed no aid from me ; what others had seen, he had seen, and he nodded an affirmative to my unspoken question.

"What do you think it means ?" I asked, as we came up into the wind, and the men were belaying after close hauling for the beat ; "are they hiding from us, or is she deserted ?"

But the only answer I got was the one word "Rum," uttered with a jerky emphasis, and taken up by Dan, who said—

"Very rum, and a good many drunk below, or I don't know the taste of it."

The obvious thought that the yacht we had sought and run down was without living men upon her decks had taken the lilt from the seamen's merry tongues, and a gloom settled on us all. Perhaps it was more than a mere surmise, for an uncanny feeling of something dreadful to come took hold of me, and I feared that, finding the yacht, we had also found the devil's work ; but I held my peace on that, and made up my mind to act.

"Skipper," said I, "order a boat out ; I'm going aboard her."

He looked at me, and shook his head.

"When the wind falls, perhaps ; but now !" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Is there any sign that the breeze will drop ?"

"None at present ; but I'll tell you more in an hour. Meanwhile," and here he whispered, "get your pistols out and say nothing to the men. I shall follow her."

His advice was wise ; and as the dark began to fall and the night breeze to blow fresh, while the yacht ahead of us swung here and there, almost making circles about us, we have to for the time and watched her. I begged Mary to go below, but she received the suggestion with merriment.

"Go below, when the men say there's fun coming ! Why should I go below ?"

"Because it may be serious fun."

She took my arm, and linking herself closely to me as to a brother, she said—

"Because there's danger to you and to Roderick ; isn't that it, Mark ?"

"Not to us any more than to the men ; and there may be no danger, of course. It's only a thought of mine."

"And of mine too. I shall stay where I am, or Roderick will go to sleep."

"What does Roderick say ?"

• He had joined us on the starboard side, and was gazing over the sea at the pursued yacht, which lay shaking dead in the wind's eye, but Mary's question upset whatever speculation he had entered upon.

"I've got an opinion," he drawled, with a yawn.

"You don't say so——"

"The wind's falling, and it's getting beastly dark."

"Two fairly obvious conclusions ; do you think you could keep sufficiently awake to help man the boat ?—in another ten minutes we shall see nothing."

"Do you think I'm a fool, that I'm going to stop here ?"

"Forgive me, but I'm getting anxious. Martin Hall sailed on that yacht ; and I promised to help him—but there's no need for you to do anything, you know."

"No need when you are going—pshaw, I'll fetch my Colt, and Mary shall watch us. I don't think she is afraid of much, are you, Rats ?"—he called her "Rats" because they were the one thing on earth she feared—and then he went below, and I followed him, getting my revolver and my oilskins, for I knew that it would be wet work. I had scarce reached the deck again when I felt the schooner moving ; but no break of light showed the place where the other was, and the skipper called presently for a blue flare, which cast a glowing light for many hundred yards, and still left us uncertain.

"She's gone, for sure," said Dan to the men around him, for every soul on board, even including old Chasselot—called by the men "Cuss-a-lot"—our cook, was staring into the thick night; "and I wouldn't stake a noggin that her crew ain't cheated the old un at last an' gone down singing. It's mighty easy to die with your head full o' rum, but I don't go for to choose it meself, not particler."

Billy Eightbells, the second mate, was quite of Dan's opinion. The looks of the others told me then that they began to fear the adventure. Billy was the first really to give expression to the common sentiment.

"Making bold to speak," he said, "it were two years ago come Christmas as I met something like this afore, down Rio way——"

"Was it at eight bells, Billy?" asked Mary mischievously. She knew that all Billy's yarns began at eight bells.

"Well, I think it were, mum, but as I was saying——"

"Flash again," said the skipper, suddenly interrupting the harangue, and as the blue light flashed we saw right ahead of us the wanderer we sought; but she was bearing down upon us, and there was fear in the skipper's voice when he roared—

"For God's sake, hard a-starboard!"

The helm went over, and the yacht loomed up black, as our own light died away; and passed us within a cable's length. What lift of the night there was showed us her decks again; but they were not deserted, for as one or two aboard gave a great cry, I saw the white and horribly distorted face of a man who clung to the main shrouds—and he alone was guardian of the wanderer.

The horrid vision struck my own men with a deadly fearing.

"May the Lord help us!" said Dan.

"And him!" added Piping Jack solemnly.

"Was he alive, d'you think?" asked Dan.

"It's my opinion he'd seen something as no Christian man ought to see. Please God, we all get to port again!"

"Please God!" said half-a-dozen; and their words had meaning.

For myself, my thoughts were very different. That vision of the man I had left well and hopeful and strong not three days since was terrible to me. A brave man had gone to his death, but to what a death, if that agonised face and distorted visage betokened aught! And I had promised to aid him, and was drifting there with the schooner, raising no hand to give him help.

"Skipper," I cried, "this time we'll risk getting a boat off; I'm going aboard that vessel now, if I drown before I return." Then I turned to the men, and said: "You saw the yacht pass just now, and you saw that man aboard her—he's my friend, and I'm going to fetch him. Who amongst you is coming with me?"

They hung back for a moment before the stuff that was in them showed itself, then Dan lurched out, and said—

"I go!"

Billy Eightbells followed.

"And I," said he, "if it's the Old One himself."

"And I" said Piping Jack.

"And I," said Planks, the carpenter.

"Come on, then, and take your knives in your belts. Skipper, put about and show another light."

He obeyed mechanically, saying nothing; but he was a brave man, I knew. It was our luck to find that the boat went away from the davits with no more than a couple of buckets of water in her; and in two minutes' time the men were giving way, and we rose and fell to the still choppy sea, while the green spray ran from our oilskins in gallons. In this way we made a couple of hundred yards in the direction we judged the yacht would turn, and lit a flash. It showed her a quarter of a mile away, jibbing round and coming into the wind again.

"We shall catch her on the tack if she holds her bearing," said Dan, "and be aboard in ten minutes."

"What then?" said Billy.

"Ay, what then?" echoed the others.

"But it's a friend of the gov'nor's," repeated Dan, "and he's in danger—no common danger, neither. Please God, we all get to port again."

"Please God!" they responded, and Roderick, who sat at the tiller with me, whispered—

"I never saw men who liked a job less."

As the good fellows gave way again, and the boat rode easily before the wind, I noticed for the first time that the clouds were scattering; and we had not made another cable's length when a great cloud above us showed silver at its edges, and opaquely white in its centre, through which the moon shone. Anon it dissolved, and the transformation on the surface of the water was a transformation from the dark of storm to the chrome light of a summer moon. There, around us, the panorama stretched out: the sea, white-waved and rolling; the lights of a steamer to port; of a couple of sailing vessels astern; of a fishing fleet away ahead, and nearer to the shore. But these we had no thought for, since the deserted yacht was beating up to us, and we stood right in her track.

"Get a grapnel forward, and look out there," cried Dan, who was in command; and Billy stood ready, while we could hear the swish of the waves against the cutter's bows, and every man instinctively put his hand on his pistol or his knife.

As if to help us, the wind fell away as the schooner came up, and she began to shake her sails; making no way as she headed almost due east. It seemed a fit moment for effort, and Dan had just sung out "Give way," when every man who had gripped an oar let go the handle again and sat with horror writ on his countenance. For, almost with the words of the order, there was the sound as of fierce contest, of the bursting of wood, and the spread of flame; and in that instant the decks of the yacht were ripped up, and sheets of fire rose from them to the rigging above. The light of this mighty flare spread instantly over the sea about her, and far away you could look on the rolling waves, red as waves of fire. A terrible sight it was, and terrible sounds were those of the wood rending with the heat, of the stays snapping and flying, of the hissing of the flame where it met the water. But it was a sight of infinite horror to us, because we knew that one who might yet live was a prisoner of the conflagration—the one passenger, as it seemed then, of the vessel which was doomed.

"Give way," roared Dan again, for the men sat motionless with terror. "Are you going to let him burn? May God have mercy on him, for he needs mercy!"

The words awed them. They shot the long-boat forward; and I stood in her stern to observe, if I could, what passed on the burning decks. And I saw a sight the like to which I pray that I may never see again. Martin Hall stood at the main shrouds, motionless, volumes of flame around him, his figure clear to be viewed by that awful beacon.

"Why doesn't he jump it?" I called aloud. "If he can't swim, he could keep above until we're alongside"; and then I roared "Ahoy!" and every man repeated the cry, calling "Ahoy!" each time he bent to his oar, his voice hoarse with excitement. But Martin Hall never moved, his gaunt figure was motionless—the flames beat upon it, it did not stir; and we drew near enough anon and knew the worst.

"Devils' work, devils' work!" said Dan; "he's lashed there—and he's dead!" But the men still cried "Ahoy!" as they rushed their oars through the water, and were as those mad with fiery drink.

"Easy!" roared Dan. "Easy, for a parcel of stark fools! Would you run alongside her?"

There they lay, for any nearer approach would have been perilous, and even in that place where we were, twenty feet on the windward side, the heat was nigh unbearable. So near were we that I looked close as it might be into the dead face of Martin Hall, and saw that the fiends who had lashed him there had done their work too well. But I hoped in my heart that he had been dead when the end of the ship had begun to curl, and that it were no reproach to me that he had perished: for to save his body from that holocaust was work no man might do.

So did we watch the mounting fire, and the last tack of the yacht *La France*. Saucily she raised her head to a new breeze, shook her great sail of flame in the night, and scattered red light about her. Then she dipped her burning jib as if in salute, and there was darkness.

"Rest to a good ship," said Dan, in melancholy mood; but I said—

"Rest to a friend." I had known the man whose death had come; and when his body went below I hungered for the grip of the hand which was then washed by the Channel waves.

"Give way," I cried to the men, who sat silent in their fear of it, and when they rowed again they cried as before, "Ahoy"; so strong and vivid was the picture which the sea had then put out.

As we neared our own ship, Roderick endeavoured to speak to me, but his voice failed, and he took my hand, giving it a great grip. Then we came on board, where Mary waited for us with a white face, and the others stood silent; but we said nothing to them, going below. There I locked myself in my own cabin, and though fatigue lay heavy on me, and my eyes were clouded with the touch of sleep, I took Martin Hall's papers from my locker, and lighted the lamp to read them through.

But not without awe, for they were a message from the dead.

CHAPTER V.

THE WRITING OF MARTIN HALL.

THE manuscript, which was sealed on its cover in many places, consisted of several pages of close writing, and of sketches and scraps from newspapers—Italian, French, and English. The sketches I looked at first, and was not a little surprised to see that one of them was the portrait of the man known as "Roaring John," whom I had met at Paris in the strange company; while there was with this a blurred and faint outline of the features of the seaman called "Four-Eyes," who had come to me at the *Hôtel Scribe* with the bidding to go aboard *La France*. But what, perhaps, was even more difficult to be understood was the picture of the great hull of what I judged to be a warship, showing her a-building, with the work yet progressing on her decks. The newspaper cuttings I deemed to be in some part an explanation of these sketches, for one of them gave a description of a very noteworthy battle-ship, constructed for a South American Republic, but in much secrecy; while another hinted that great pains had been taken with the vessel, which was built at a mighty cost, and on so new a plan that the shipwrights refused to give information concerning her until she had been some months at sea to prove her.

All this reading remained enigmatical, of course, and as I could make nothing of it to connect it with the events I have narrated, I went on to the writing, which was fine and small, as the writing of an exact man. And the words upon the head of it were these:—

SOME ACCOUNT OF A NAMELESS WARSHIP, OF HER CREW, AND HER PURPOSE.

Written for the eyes of Mark Strong, by Martin Hall, sometime his friend.

I put from me the sorrow of the thought which the last three words brought to me, and read therefrom this history, which had these few sentences as its preface:—

"You read these words, Mark Strong, when I am dead; and I would ask you before you go further with them to consider well if you would wish, or have inclination for, a pursuit in which I have lost all that a man can lose, and in which your risk, do you take the work upon you, will be no less than mine was. For if you read what is written here, and have in you that stuff which cannot brook mystery, and is fired when mystery also is danger, I know that you will venture upon this undertaking at the point where death has held my hand; and that by so doing you may reap where I have sown. And with this, think nor act in any haste lest you lay to my charge that which may befall you in the pursuit you are about to begin."

I read on, for the desire to do justice to Martin Hall was strong upon me at the very beginning of it.

From that place the story was in great part autobiographical, but in no sense egotistical. It was, as you shall see, the simple narration of a man sincere in his dreaming, if he did dream; logical in his madness, if he were mad. And this was his story as first I read it:—

"Having well considered the warning which is the superscription of this record, you have determined to continue this narrative, I do not doubt; for I judge you to be a man who, having tasted the succulent dish of curiosity, will not put it away until you have eaten your fill. I will tell you, therefore, such a part of my life as you should know when you come to ask yourself the question, 'Is this man a fool or an imbecile, a crack-brained faddist or the victim of hallucination?' This question should arise at a later stage, and I beg you not to put it until you have read every word that I have written here.

"I was born in Liverpool, thirty-three years ago, and was educated for a very few years at the well-known institute in that city. They taught me there that consciousness of ignorance which is half an education; and being the son of a man who starved on a fine ability for modelling things in clay, and plaster-moulding, I went out presently to make my living. First to America, you doubt not, to get the experience of coming home again; then to the Cape, to watch other men dig diamonds; to Rome, to Naples, to Genoa, that I might know what it was to want food; to South America as an able seaman; to Australia in the stoke-hole of a South Sea liner; home again to my poor father, who lay dead when I reached Liverpool.

"I was twenty-two years old then, and glutted with life. I had no relation living that I knew of; no friend who was not also a plain acquaintance. By what chance it was I cannot tell, but I drifted like a living log into the detective force of my city, and after working up for a few years through the grades, they put me on the landing stage at Liverpool to watch the men who wished to emigrate because they had no opinion of the police force here. It was miserable employment, but educating, for it taught me to read faces that were disguised, old men become beardless, young men made old at the touch of a *coiffeur*. I suppose I had more than common success, for when I had been so employed for five years, I was sent to London by our people and there commanded to go to the Admiralty and get new instructions. Regard this, please, as the first mark in this record I am making. Of my work for our own people I may not tell even you, since I engaged upon it under solemn bond of secrecy; but I can indicate that I was sent to Italy to pick up facts in the dockyards there, and that our people relied on my gifts of disguise, and on my knowledge of Italian, learnt upon Italian ships and in Italian ports. In short, I was expected to provide plans and accounts of many things material to our own service, and I entered on the business with alacrity, gained admittance to the public dockyards, and knew in a twelvemonth all that any man could learn who had his wits only to glide him, and as much of those of other men as he could pick up.

"But I imagine your natural impatience, and your mental exclamation, 'What has all this rignmarole to do with me—how does it affect this pretended narrative?' Bear with me a moment when I tell you that it is vital to my story. It was in Italy during my second year of work that I had cause to be at Spezia, inspecting there a new type of gun-boat about which there was much talk and many opinions. I have

no need to tell you, who have not the bombastic knowledge of a one-city man, that at Spezia is to be found all that is great in the naval life of Italy; on the grand forts of the bay which received the ashes of Shelley are her finest guns; on the glorious hills which arise above her limpid blue waters are her chief fortifications. There, at the feet of the hills where grows the olive, and where the vine matures to luxurious growth, you will find in juxtaposition with Nature's emblems of peace the store-houses of the shot and shell which one day shall sow the sea and the land with blood. Amongst these fortifications, amidst these adamantine terraces and turrets my work lay; but the most part of it was done in the dockyards, both in the yards which were the property of the Government and in the private yards. My recreation was a rare cruise to the lovely gulfs which the bay embosoms, to the Casa di Mare, to Fezzano, to the Temple of Venus at the Porto Venere; or a walk when there was golden-red light on the clustering vines, and the Apennines were capped with the spreading fire which falls on them when the sun passes low at twilight. Many an hour I stood above the old town, asking, why a common cheat of a spy, as I reckoned myself, should presume to find other thoughts when breathing that air laden of solitude; but they came to me whether I would or no; and it was often on my mind to throw over the whole business of prying; and to set out on a work which should achieve something, if only a little, for humanity. That I did not follow this impulse, which grew upon me from day to day, is to be laid to the charge of one of those very walks upon the hill-side about which I have been telling you. It was an evening late in the year, and the sun was just setting. I watched the changing hues of the peaks as the light spread from point to point; watched it reddening the sea, and leaving it black in the shadows; watched it upon the church spires of Spezia, upon the castle roof, upon the steel hulls of great ships. And then I saw a strange thing, for amongst all the vessels which were so burnished by the invisible hand of Heaven, I saw one that stood out beyond them all, a great globe, not of silver, but of golden fire. There was no doubt about it at all; I rubbed my eyes, I used the glass I always carried with me; I viewed the hull I saw lying there from half-a-dozen heights; and I was sure that what I saw was no effect of evening light or strange refraction. The ship I looked on was built either of brass, or of some alloy of brass, as it seemed to me, for the notion that she could be plated with gold was preposterous; and yet the more I examined her, the more clearly did I make out that her hull was constructed of a metal infinitely gold-like, and of so beautiful a colour in the reddened stream which shone upon it that the whole ship had the aspect of a mirror of the purest gold I had ever seen.

"The sudden fading of the light behind the hills shut the vision—I could not call it less—from my eyes. The dark fell, and the vines rustled with the cold coming of night. I returned to the town quickly, and neglecting any thought of dinner, I went straight to the sea-front and began, if I could, to find where the water lay wherein this extraordinary steamer was docked. I had taken the bearings of it from the hills, and I was very quickly at that spot where I thought to have seen the strange vessel. There, truly enough, was a dock in which two small coasting steamers were moored, but of a sign of that which I sought there was none. I should have had the matter out there and then, searching the place to its extremity; but I had not been at my work ten minutes when I knew that I was watched. A man, dressed as a rough sailor, and remarkable for the hideousness of his face and a curious malformation of one tooth, lurked behind the heaps of sea-lumber, and followed me from point to point. I did not care to have any altercation, so I left the matter there; but, being determined to probe the mystery to the very bottom, I returned in a good disguise of a common English seaman on the following evening, and again entered the dockyard. The same man was watching, but he had no suspicion of me.

"Any job going?" I asked, and the question seemed to interest him.

"I reckon that depends on the man," he replied, sticking his hands deep into his pockets, and squirting his filthy tobacco all over the timber about. "What's a little wizen chap like you good for, except to get yer neck broken?"

"'All in my line,' I answered jauntily, having fixed my plan; 'I'm starving amongst these cursed cut-throats here, and I'm ready for anything.'

"'Starving, are you! Then blam me if you shan't earn your supper. D'y'see that four feet of bullock's fat and nigger working at them iron pins in the far corner?'—he pointed to a thick-set, dark and burly seaman working in the way he had described—'go and stick yer knife in him, and I'm good for a bottle—two, if you like, you darned little shootin' rat of a man'; and he clutched me with his great paw and shook me until my teeth chattered again. But his look was full of meaning, and I believe that he wished every word he said.

"'Stick your knife into the man yourself,' I replied, when I was free of him, 'you great Yankee lubber—for another word I'd give you a taste of mine now.'

"He looked at me as I stood making this poor mock of a threat, and laughed till he rang up the hill-sides. Then he said—

"'You're my sort; I reckon I know your flag. Out with it, and we'll pour liquor on it, I guess; for there ain't no foolin' you—no, by thunder! You're just a daisy of a man, you are; so come along and let the nigger be. As for hurtin' of 'im—why, so help me blazes, he's my pard, he is, and I love him like my own little brother what died of lead-poisonin' down Sint Louis way. You come along, you little cuss, and see if I don't make you dance—oh I reckon!'

"I take these words from my note-book, and write them out for you, to give you some idea of the class of man I met with first on this adventure. More of his nice language I do not intend to trouble you with; but will say that I drank with him, and later on with his companions, about as fine a dozen of self-stamped rascals as ever I wish to see. Next day, I came again to the dockyard, for the conversation of the previous evening had convinced me beyond doubt that I was at the foot of a mystery, and, to my delight, I got employment from the chief of the gang, named 'Roaring John' by his friends; and was soon at work on the simple and matter-of-fact business of cutting planks. This gave me an entry to the dockyard—all I wished at the moment.

"Now, you may ask, 'Why did you take the trouble to do all this from the mere motive of curiosity engendered by the strange ship you thought you saw from the hills?' I will tell you briefly. The fact of my being watched when I entered the dock convinced me that there was something there which no stranger might see. That which no stranger may see in a foreign yard spells also the word money. If there was any information to be got in that dock, I could sell it to my own Government, or to the first Government in Europe I chose to haggle with. This reason alone made me a hewer of wood amongst foul-mouthed companions, a tar-bedaubed loafer in a crew of loafers.

"You see me, then, at the stage when I had got admission to the dock, but had learnt nothing of the vessel. It is true that I was admitted only to the outer basin, where the coasting steamers lay, and that the man 'Roaring John' threatened me with all the curses he could command if I passed the gate which opened into the dock beyond; but such threats to a man whose business it was to lay bare mystery, had no more effect on me than the braying of an ass in a field of clover. Minute by minute and hour by hour, I waited my opportunity. It came to me on the morning of the eighth day, when, in the poor hope of getting something by the loss of sleep, I reached the yard at four o'clock; and the gate being unopen, I lurked in hiding until the first man should come. He was no other than the one who had engaged me; and when he had gone in, about five minutes after I had come, he did not close the second door after him, there being no men then at their work. I need not tell you that I used my eyes well in those minutes, and while he was away—this was no more than a quarter of an hour—I had seen all I wished to see. There, sure enough, lay the most remarkable war-ship I had ever beheld—a great, well-armed cruiser, whose decks were bright with quick-firing guns, whose lines showed novelty in every inch of them. More remarkable than anything, however, was the confirmation of that which I had seen from the hills. The ship, seemingly, was built of the purest gold. This, of course, I knew could not be; but as the sun got up and his

light fell on the vessel, I thought that I had never seen a more glorious sight. She shone with the refulgent beauty of a thousand mirrors; every foot of her deck, of her turrets, of her upper house made a sheen of dazzling fire; the points of her deck lights were as beacons, all lurid and a-gold. So marvellous, truly, was her aspect, that I forgot all else but fit, and stood entranced, marvelling, forgetful of my self and purpose. The flash of a knife in the air and a fearful oath brought me to my senses to know that I was in the grasp of the man 'Roaring John.'

"Curse you for a small-eyed cheat! what are you doing here?" he asked, shaking me and threatening every minute to let me feel his steel; 'what are you doing here, you little cat of a man? Spit it out, or I'm damned if I don't spit you; oh, I guess!'

"I should have made some answer in the rough voice I always put on in this undertaking, but a bad mishap befell me. The best of my disguise was the thick, bushy black hair I wore about my face. As the ruffian went to take a firmer hold of my collar, he pulled aside a portion of my beard, and left my chin clean-shaven beneath as naturally it was. The intense surprise of this discovery seemed to hit him like a blow. He stepped back with a murderous look in his eyes—a look which meant that, if I stayed there to deal with him alone, I had not another minute to live. But I cheated him again, and, turning on my heel, I fled with all the speed I possessed, and got into the street with twenty ruffians at my heels, and a hue and cry such as I hope never to hear again.

"The escape was clever, but I reached my hotel and sat down to find expressions equal in power to my folly. The thought that I, who was a vulgar spy by profession, had committed a mistake worthy of a novelist's policeman, was gall and wormwood to me. Yet I was sure that I had cut off all hope of returning to the yard; and what information I was to get must come by other modes. The nature of these I knew not, but I was determined to set out upon a visit to Signor Vezzia, who was the builder to whom the docks wherein I worked belonged. To him I came as the pretended agent of a shipping firm in New York, with whom I had some little acquaintance, and he gave me audience readily. He was very willing to hear me when he learnt that I was in quest of a builder to lay down steamers for the American trade with Italy; and some while we passed in great cordiality, so ripe on his part that I ventured the other business.

"By-the-by, Signor Vezzia, that's a marvellous battle-ship you have in your second dock; I have never seen anything like her before."

"I spoke the words, and read him as one reads a barometer. He shrank visibly into his bulb, and the tone of his conversation marked a storm. I heard him mutter 'Diavolo!' under his breath, and then the mercury of his conversation mounted quickly.

"Yes, yes; a curious vessel, quite a special thing, for a South American Republic, an idea of theirs—but you will extend me the favour of your pardon, I am busy"—and in his excitement he put his spectacles off and on, and called 'Giovanni, Giovanni!' to his head clerk, who made business to be rid of me. Clearly, as a piece in the game I was playing, Signor Vezzia had made his solitary move. He was no more upon my board, miserably void as it was, and in despair I mounted to my hill-top again; and spent the morning where the vines grew, looking down upon the golden ship which was built for 'a South American Republic.' That tale I never believed, for the man's face marked it as a lie as he gave it to me; but the mere telling of it added piquancy to the dish I had tasted of, and I resolved in that hour to devote myself heart and soul to the work of unravelling the slender threads, even if I lost my common employment in the business. The reverie held me long. I was roused from it by the sight of a dull vapour mounting from the funnel of the nameless ship. She was going to sail then—at the next tide she might leave Spezia and there would be no more hope. I threw a word at my dreaming, and hurried from the vines to my hotel in the town below.

"Now you may form opinion that my prospects in this abstruse and perplexing chase were not at that time much to vaunt. My theories and my acts had led me

into a mental *cul-de-sac*, a blind alley, where, in lack of exit, I took hold of every straw that the wind of thought set flying. Here was the problem at this stage as it then appeared to me:—Item (1): A ship built of some metal I had no knowledge of. Item (2): A ship that shone like a rich sunset on a garden lake. Item (3): A ship that was armed to the full, as a casual glance told me, with every kind of quick-firing guns, and with two ten-inch guns in her turret. Item (4): A ruffianly black-guard, to whom the cutting of a throat seemed meat and drink, with ten other rogues no less deserving, from a murderous point of view, put to watch about the ship that no strange eye might look upon her. Item (5): The confusion of Signor Vezzia, who made a fine tale and said at the same time with his eyes ‘This is a lie, and a bad one; I’m sorry that I have nothing better ready.’ Item (6): My own adamant conviction that I stood near by some mystery, which was about to be a big mystery, and which would pay me to pursue. ‘A fine bundle of nonsense,’ I hear you say; ‘as silly a flight of a vaporous brain as ever man conceived’—but stay your words awhile; remember that one who is bred up at the keyhole lets himself, if he be wise, be moved by his impulses, and first opinions. He does not quit them until he knows them to be false. Instinct told me to go on in this work, if I lost all other, if I starved, if I drowned, if I died at it. And to go on I meant.

“This was my musing at the Albergo, and when it was over I laughed aloud at its quixotic folly. ‘Oh, poor fool,’ I said, ‘miserable, brain-blinded, groping fool, to talk of going on when the ship sails this night, this very night; and unless you put agents on in every part of the globe, you will never hear of her again. What a fine piece of dreamer’s wit is yours! what a bar-parlour yarn to tell rustics in Somerset! Get up, and mind your own business, go on with you common labour, and let the ship and her crew go to the devil if they like.’ For the matter of that, this advice perforce I had to follow, for I did not possess one single clue at that moment; and although I racked my brains for one all the afternoon, and went often to the hill-top to see if the nameless ship yet lay in the dock, I could pick up no new thread, nor light upon any infinitesimal vein of material. The very want of a *point d’appui* irritated a brain already excited to a fine condition of unrest. Any hour the ship might sail; any hour something which would give me the name of her owner might come to me—but the hours went on and nothing came. I dined, and was no step advanced; I smoked cigars in three cafés, and was again at the beginning; I visited half-a-dozen folk I knew, and drew no word to help me. At last, mocking the whole mystery with a fine English phrase, I said, ‘Let her go’; and I returned to the Albergo and to bed. I had hunted a marine covert for two days and had drawn blank.

“I have said that I went to bed, but it was a poor folly of a process, you do not doubt. I lay down, indeed, and read Poe’s tales, which I love, an hour or more: then I went over the whole business again, raised every point; made my brain aflame with speculation; put out the candle; lit it again; read more mystery; held out the hand to sleep; told sleep I did not want her. You who know me will know also how useless are such gamings of man with Nature. I could not have slept if a king’s ransom went with the sleeping; and so I lay fretful, blameful, scolding myself, condoling with myself, vowing the whole problem a plague and a cheat. This idle wandering might have lasted until dawn, had it not been for my neighbour in the room to my left, who began to talk with a low buzz as of a night-insect humming in a bed-curtain. The surging of the voice amused me; I lay quite still and listened to it. Now it rose loud—I gleaned a word, and was pleased; now it fell—and I fretted; but anon another voice was added to the first, and, if the one had pleased me, the second thrilled me. It was the voice of my friend who wished to stab me at the dock.

“Two words spoken by this man brought me to my feet; two more to the thin wooden door which divided our rooms, as oft you’ll find them divided in cafés through Italy. With feverish impatience, I knelt to pry through the keyhole; and muttered a big oath when I saw that it was stuffed with paper, and that the sight of the two men was hidden from me. But I listened with an ear long trained to listen-

ing, and, although the men spoke so that few words reached me, I remained an whole hour upon my knees, amazed that the man should thus be sent by Providence to my very hotel ; excited with the new sensation of a foot upon the trail. The ship had not sailed, then, for here was the ruffian, who watched her, wasting rest in the first hours to hold a parley ; and if a parley, with whom ? Why, with those who paid him for the work, I did not doubt.

"At the end of an hour the voices ceased, but there was still a movement in the room. That was hushed too ; and I judged that my neighbour had gone to bed. For myself, I had one of two courses before me : either to court sleep and wait luck with the sun, or to see there and then what was in the room, and by whom it was occupied. You ask, How was that possible ? but you forget my scurvy trade again. In my bag were forbidden implements sufficient to stock Clerkenwell. I took from that a brace and bitt, and an oiled saw. In ten minutes I cut a hole in the partition and put my eye to it, waiting first to see if any man moved. For the moment my heart quaked as I thought that both the fellows had gone, but one look reassured me. A burly, black-bearded man sat in a reverie before a dressing-table, and I saw that there was spread upon the table a great heap of jewels which, at the lowest valuation, must have been worth a hundred thousand pounds. And beside the jewels was a big bull-dog revolver, close to the man's hand.

"The tension of the strange situation lasted for some minutes. I had no clear vision through my spy-hole, and knew not at the first watching whether the man I saw was asleep or awake. A finer inspection of him, made with a catlike poise as I knelt crouching at the door, showed me that he slept : had fallen to sleep with his fingers amongst the jewels—a great rough dog of a man clutching wealth in his dreaming. And he was, then, one of those connected with the golden ship in the harbour—the strange ship manned by cut-throats, and built for a 'South American Republic.' Indeed did the mystery deepen, the problem became more profound, every moment that I worked upon it. Who was this man ? I asked, and why did he sit in an Italian hotel fingering jewels, and giving a meeting-place at midnight to a common murderer from a dockyard ? Were the jewels his own ? Had he stolen them ? Suggestions and queries poured upon me ; I felt that, whatever it might be, I would know the truth ; and I resolved to dare beyond my custom, and to learn more of the bearded man and of his gems.

"Watch me, then, as I knelt for a whole hour at the place of observation, and waited for the fellow to awake. It must have been well on towards morning when he stirred in his chair, and then sat bolt upright. I thought he looked to have some tremor of nervousness upon him ; clutching hastily at the jewels to put them in a great leather case, which again he shut in a large iron box, locking both, and placing the key under his pillow. After that he threw off his clothes with some impatience, and, leaving the lamp which burned upon his dressing-table, he dropped upon his bed. For myself, my plan was already contrived ; I had determined to go to great risk, and to enter the room—playing the common cheat again, yet more than the common cheat, for that was an enterprise which needed all the fine caution and daring which long years of police work had taught me. I had not only to ape the housebreaker, but also to get the good cunning of a jewel robber—and yet I knew that the things I had seen warranted me, from my point of view, in doing what I did, and that desperate means alone were fit to cope with the situation.

"Now the new work was quick. Being assured that my man slept, I put back with some cold glue, which was always in my tool chest, the piece I had cut from the door, and then picked the lock with one grip of my small pincers. My revolver I carried in the belt at my waist, for my hands were occupied with a soft cloth and a bottle of chloroform. I had big felt slippers upon my feet ; and went straight to his bed, where I let him breathe the drug for a few moments, and deepened his light sleep until it became heavy unconsciousness. In this state I did what I would with him, and, having no fear of his awaking, I got at his keys and his jewels, and saw what I wished. There, true enough, were precious stones of all values : Brazilian diamonds, Cape stones tinged with yellow, yet big and valuable, the finer class of

Indian turquoise, pink pearls, black pearls—all these loosely wrapped in tissue paper; but a magnificent parcel such as you would see only in a West End house in London. I must confess, however, that these stones interested me but little, for as I delved amongst his treasures I brought up at last a necklace of opals and diamonds, the first set gems I had discovered; and as I held them to the lamp and examined the curious grouping of the stones, and the strange Eastern form of the clasp, I knew that I had seen the bundle before. The conviction was instantaneous, powerful, convincing; yet even with my aptitude for recalling names, places, and things, I could not in my mind place those jewels. None the less was I assured that the one solid clue I had yet taken hold of was in my keeping; and, as a quick glance round the chamber told me no more, I put up the baubles in their case again, replaced the key, and quitted the chamber. Do not think, however, that I had neglected to mark my man: every line of his face was written in my mental notebook, every peculiarity of head and countenance, the shape of his arms, above all, the mould of the hands, that wonderful index to recognition; and henceforth I knew that I could pick him from a hundred thousand.

"When I had done with this business, I lay upon my bed, and brought the whole of my recollection back upon the jewels. Where had I seen them; in what circumstances; in whose hands? Again and again I travelled old ground, exhumed buried cases, dwelt upon names of forgotten criminals, and of big world people. An hour's intense mental concentration told me nothing; the dark of the hour before dawn gave way to the cold breaking of morning light, and yet I tossed in an agony of blank and futile reasoning. I must have slept from the sheer blinding of the brain somewhere about that hour; and in my dreaming I got what wakefulness had denied to me. There in my sleep was the whole history of the stones written for me. I remembered the Liverpool landing-stage; the departure of the Star liner, *City of St. Petersburg*, for New York; the arrest of the notorious jewel-thief, Carl Reichsmann; the discovery of the opal and diamond necklace upon him; the restoration of it to—to—the brain failed for a moment—then with a loud cry of delight, which roused me, I pronounced the words; to Lady Hardon, of 202A, Berkeley Square, London.

"It is a ridiculous situation to sit up in bed asking yourself if your dream be reality, or your reality be a dream; but when I awoke with that name on my lips, the joy of the thing was so surpassing that I repeated the name again and again, muttering it as I got into my clothes, using it all the time I washed, and speaking it aloud when I stood before the glass to tie my cravat. Here, I suppose the folly of the whole repetition dawned upon me, for, of a sudden, I shut my lips firm and close, and bethought me of the man in the next room. What of him? Was he still there? I listened. There was no sound, not so much as of a heavy sleeper. He had gone then, and had Lady Hardon's jewels—yet Lady Hardon, Lady Hardon—nay, but you could never know the sudden and awful emotion of that great awakening which came to me in that moment when my memory travelled quickly on to Lady Hardon's end; for I remembered then that she went down in the great steamer *Alexandria*, which was lost in the Bay of Biscay twelve months before I discovered the golden ship in the dockyard at Spezia; and I recalled the fact, known world-wide, that her famous jewels, this necklace amongst them, had gone with her to her end. Lost, I say; yet that was the account at Lloyd's; lost with never a soul to give a word about her agony; lost hopelessly in the broad of the bay. How came it, then, that this man who knew the ruffians in the dockyard below; who seemed a common fellow, yet possessed a hundred thousand pounds' worth of jewellery, how came it that he had got that which the world thought to be lying on the sands of the bay? You say, 'Pshaw, it was not the same bauble;' that is the obvious answer to my theorising, but in the recognition of historic gems a man trained as I was never makes an error. I would have staked my life that the jewels were those supposed to be under the sea; and, moved to a state of deep excitement, I left my hotel without breakfast, and mounted to the hill-top for tidings of the great vessel.

"But she had sailed, and the dock which had held her was empty.

"This discovery did not daunt me, for I had expected it. I should have been surprised if she had been at her berth; and the fact that she had weighed under cover of night fell in so well with my anticipation that I waited only to ascertain officially what ships had left Spezia during the past twenty-four hours. They told me at the Customs that the Brazilian war-vessel built by Signor Vezzia weighed at three a.m.; but more I could not learn, for these men had evidently been well bribed, and were as dumb as unfee'd lawyers. I knew that their information was not worth a groat, and hurried back to the Albergo to assure myself that my neighbour with the necklace had sailed also. To my surprise, he was at breakfast when I arrived at the hotel; and so one great link in my theoretic chain snapped at the first test. As he had not sailed with the others, he could have no direct connection with the nameless ship, no nautical part or lot with her. But what was he, then? That I meant to know as soon as opportunity should serve.

* * * * *

"I have led you up, Strong, step by step, through the details of this work to this point, that you may have the facts unalloyed as I have them; and may construct your history from this preamble as I have constructed mine. I am now about to move over the ground more quickly. I will quit Spezia, and ask you to come with me, after the interval of nigh a year—during which no man had known that which I now tell you—to London, where, in an hotel in Cecil Street, Strand, I was again the neighbour of the man with the jewels whom I had taken so daring an advantage of in Italy. Let me tell you briefly what had happened in the between-time. The day on which the nameless ship left the dock, this man—whom, I may say at once, I have always met under the name of Captain Black—quitted the town and reached Paris. Thither I followed him, staying one day in the French capital, but going onward with him on the following morning to Cherbourg. There he went aboard a small yacht, and I lost him in the Channel. I returned at once to Italy, and wired to friends in the police force at New York, at London, and San Francisco, and at three ports in South America for news (a) of a new war-ship lately completed at Spezia for the Brazilian republic; (b) of a man known as Captain Black, who left the port of Cherbourg in the cutter-yacht *La France* on the morning of October 30th. For nearly twelve months I waited for an answer to these questions; but none came to me. To the best of my knowledge, the nameless war-ship was never seen upon the high seas. I began to ask myself, if she existed, how came it that a vessel, burnished to the beauty of gold, had been spoken of none, seen of none, reported in no harbour, mentioned in no despatch? Yet she remained known but to her crew and to me; and my study of shipping lists, gazettes, and papers in all tongues, never gave me clue to her. Only this, I had such a record of navigation as I think man never kept yet before; and I marked it as curious, if nothing more, that in the month when the cruiser quitted Spezia three ocean-going steamers, each carrying specie to the value of more than one hundred thousand pounds, went down in fair weather, and were paid for at Lloyd's. What folly! you say again; what are you going to conclude? I answer only—God grant that I conclude falsely—that this terrible thing I suspect is the phantom of a too-keen imagination.

"Now, when no tidings came, either of the ship I sought or of the man Black, I did not lose all hope. Indeed, I was much occupied making—during a month's leisure in London—a list, as far as that were possible, of all the gems and baubles which the dead men and women on the sunken steamers had owned. This was a paltry record of bracelets, and rings, and tiaras, and clasps, such stuff as any fellow of a jeweller may sell; unconvincing stuff, worth no more than a near relation for purposes of evidence. There was but one piece of the whole mass that did not come in my category—a great box with a fine painting by Jean Petitot upon its lid, and a curious circle of jasper all about the miniatures. This was a historic piece of *bijouterie* mentioned as having once been the property of Necker, the French financier; then lost by a New York dealer, who was taking it from Paris to Boston in the

steamship *Catalania*; the ship supposed to have foundered, with the loss of all hands, off the Banks of Newfoundland, sixteen days after the nameless ship left Spezia. I made a record of this trifle, and forgot it until, many months later, a private communication from the head of the New York Secret Service told me that the man I wanted was in London; that he was an American millionaire, who owned a house on the banks of the Hudson River; who had great influence in many cities, who came to Europe to buy precious stones and miniature paintings, a man who was considered eccentric by his friends. I kept the notes, and hurried to England—for I had been to Geneva some while—and took rooms in the hotel where Captain Black was staying. Three days after I was disguised as you have seen me, selling him miniatures. Within a week, by what steps I need not pause to say, I knew that the jasper box, lost, by report, in the steamer *Catalania*, was under lock and key in his bedroom.

"I cannot tell you how that discovery agitated me. Here, indeed, was my second direct link. The man had in his possession an historic and unmistakable casket, which all the world believed to be lost in a steamer from which no soul had escaped. How I treasured that knowledge! Three months the man remained in London; during three months he was not thirty hours out of my sight or knowledge. Day by day when with him, I consulted such shipping information as I could get; and scored another mark upon my record, when I made sure that no inexplicable story from the sea was written while he remained ashore. Thus was perplexing for a surety. I could not in any way connect the man with the nameless ship, and yet he knew her crew; he was the one in whose possession the jewels were; above all, while he was ashore, there were no disasters which could not be set down to ocean peril or the act of God, as the policies say. This further knowledge held me to him with the magnetic attraction of a mystery such as I have never known in my life. I resigned my work for the Government; and henceforth gave myself heart and soul to the pursuit of the man. I followed him to Paris, to St. Petersburg; I tracked him through France to Marseilles; I watched him embark, with three of the ruffians I had seen at Spezia, in his yacht again; and within a month the yacht was in harbour at Cowes without him; while a steamer, bound from the Cape to Cadiz, and known to have specie aboard her, went out of knowledge as the others had done. Then was I sure, sure of that awful dream I had dreamed, conscious that I alone shared with that man and his crew one of the most ghastly secrets that the deep has kept within her.

"The end of my story I judge now that you anticipate. Though absolutely convinced myself, I had still lack of the one direct link to make a legal chain. I had positively to connect the man Black with the nameless ship, for this I had only done so far by pure circumstance. For many months I have made no gain in this attempt. Last year in Liverpool I sketched in yet another point in my picture. I received tidings of the man in that city, and there I did trade with him in my old disguise; but he was not alone—the crew of ruffians you have known by this time kept company with him in that bold and bestial Bohemianism you will have witnessed with me. I kept vigil there a week, but lost him at the end of that time. When he reappeared in the circles of civilisation it was in Paris, but two days ago, when I asked you to accompany me. You know that I attempted to sail with him on his cruise, and your instinct tells you why. If I could, by being two days afloat in his company, prove beyond doubt that he used his yacht as a pretence; if I could prove that when he left port in her he sailed some miles out to sea, and was picked up by the nameless ship, my chain was forged, my book complete, and I had but to call the Government to the work!

"But I have failed, and the labour I have set myself shall be done by others, but chiefly, Mark Strong, by you. From the valley of the dead whence soon I must look back, if it is to be on a life that has no achievement before God in it, I, who have laid down such a life as mine was in this cause, urge you upon it. You have youth, and money sufficient for the enterprise; you will get money in its pursuit. You have no fear of the black After, which is the end of life; but, after

all, it may come to you as it came to me, that there is the finger of the Almighty God pointing to your path of duty. I have lived the life of a common eavesdropper; but believe me that in this work I have felt the call of humanity, and hoped, if I might live to accomplish it, that the Book of the Good should find some place for my name. So may you when my mantle falls upon you. What information I have, you have. The names of my friends in the cities mentioned I have written down for you; they will serve you for the memory of my name; but be assured at the outset that you will never take this man upon the sea. And as for the money which is rightly due to the one who rids humanity of this pest, I say, go to the Admiralty in London, and lay so much of your knowledge before them as shall prevent a robbery of your due; claim a fit reward from them and the steamship companies; and, as your beginning, go now to the Hudson River—I meant to go within a month—and learn there more of the man you seek; or, if the time be ripe, lay hands there upon him. And may the spirit of a dead man breathe success upon you!"

On the yacht "Celsis," lying at Cowes, written in the month of August, for Mark Strong.

* * * * *

When I put down the papers, my eyes were tear-stained with the effort of reading, and the cabin lamp was nigh out. My interest in the writing had been so sustained that I had not seen the march of daylight, now streaming through the glass above, upon my bare cabin table. But I was burnt up almost with a fever; and the oppressive fumes from the stinking lamp seemed to choke me so, that I went above, and saw that we were at anchor in the Solent, and that the whole glory of a summer's dawn lit the sleeping waters. And all the yacht herself breathed sleep, for the others were below, and Dan alone paced the deck.

The first knowledge that I had of the true effect of Martin Hall's narrative was the muttered exclamation of this old sailor—

"Ye hav'n't slept, sir," said he; "ye're just the colour of yon ensign!"

"Quite true, Dan—it was close down there."

"Gospel truth, without a hitch! but ye're precious bad, sir; I never seed a worse figger-ed, excusing the liberty. I'd rest a bit, sir."

"Good advice, Dan. I'll sleep here an hour, if you'll get my rug from below."

I stretched myself on a deck-chair, and he covered my limbs almost with a woman's tenderness, so that I slept and dreamt again of Hall, of Captain Black, of the man "Four-Eyes," of a great holocaust on the sea. I was carried away by sleep to far cities and among other men, to great perils of the sea, to strange sights; but over them all loomed the phantom of a golden ship, and from her decks great fires came. When I awoke, a doctor from Southsea was writing down the names of drugs upon paper; and Mary was busy with ice. They told me I had slept for thirty hours, and that they had feared brain-fever. But the sleep had saved me; and when Mary talked of the doctor's order that I was to lie resting a week, I laughed aloud.

"You'd better prescribe that for Roderick," said I; "he'd rest a month, wouldn't you, old chap?"

"I don't know about a month, old man, but you mustn't try the system too much."

"Well, I'm going to try it now, anyway, for I start for London to-night!"

"What!" they cried in one voice.

"Exactly, and if Mary would not mind running on deck for a minute, I'll tell you why, Roderick."

She went at the word, casting one pleading look with her eyes as she stood at the door, but I gave no sign, and she closed it. I had fixed upon a course, and as Roderick, dreamingly indifferent, prepared to talk about that which he called my "madness," I took Hall's manuscript, and read it to him. When I had finished, there was a strange light in his eyes.

"Let us go at once," he said; and that was all.

CHAPTER VI.

I ENGAGE A SECOND MATE.

WE caught the first train to London; and were at the Hotel Columbia by Charing Cross in time for dinner. Mary had insisted on her right to accompany us, and, as we could find no valid reason why she should not, we brought her to the hotel with us. Then by way of calming that trouble, excitement, and expectation which crowded on us both, we went to Covent Garden, where the autumn season of opera was then on, and listened to the glorious music of *Orfeo* and the *Cavalleria*. Nor did either of us speak again that night of Hall or of his death; but I confess that the vision of it haunted my eyes, standing out upon all the scenes that were set, so that I saw it upon the canvas, and often before me the wind-worn struggle of a burning ship; while that awful "Ahoy!" of my own men yet rang in my ears.

When I returned to the hotel I wrote two letters, the beginning of my task. One was to the Admiralty, the other to the office of the Black Anchor Line of American Steamships. I told Roderick what I had done, but he laughed at the idea; so that I troubled him no more with it, awaiting its proof. On the next morning, in a few moments of privacy between us, he agreed to let me work alone for two days, and then to venture on suggestion himself. So it came to be that on the next day I found myself standing in a meagrely-furnished anteroom at the Admiralty, and there waiting the pleasure of one of the clerks, who had been deputed to talk with me. He was a fine fellow, I doubt not; had much merit of his faultless bow, and great worth in the nicety of his spotless waistcoat, but God never made one so dull or so preposterous a blockhead. I see him now, rolling up the starved hairs which struggled for existence upon his chin, and letting his cuffs lie well upon his bony wrists as he asked me, with a floating drawl—

"And what service can I do for you?"

For me! What service could *he* do for me? I smiled at him, and did not disguise my contempt.

"If there is any responsible person here," I said, with emphasis upon the word responsible, "I should be glad to impart to him some very curious, and, as it seems to me, very remarkable, information concerning a war-ship which has just left Spezia, and is supposed to be the property of the Brazilian Government."

"It's very good of you, don't you know," he replied, as he bent down to arrange his ample trousers; "but I fancy we heard something about her last week, so we won't trouble you, don't you know;" and he felt to see if his bow were straight.

"You may have heard something of the ship," I answered with warmth, "but that which I have to communicate is not of descriptive, but of national, importance. You cannot by any means have learnt my story, for there is only one man living who knows it."

He looked up at the clock a moment as though seeking inspiration, but his mind was quite vacant when he replied—

"It's awfully good of you, don't you know; we're so frightfully busy this month: if you could come up in a month's time——"

"In a month's time," I said, rising with scorn, "in a month's time, if you and yours don't stand condemned before Europe for a parcel of fools and incompetents, then you'll send for me, but I'll see you at blazing first—good-morning!"

I was outside the office before his exclamation of surprise had passed away; and within half an hour I sat in the private room of the secretary to the Black Anchor Steamship Company. He was a sharp man of business, keen-visaged as a ferret, and restless as a nervous horse long reined in. I told him shortly that I had reason to doubt the truth of the statement that a war-ship recently built at Spezia was intended for the purposes set down to her; that I believed she was the property of an American adventurer whose motives I scarce dared to realise; that I had proof, amounting to conviction, that this man possessed jewels which were commonly

accounted as lost in his firm's steamer *Catalania*; and that if his company would agree to bear the expense, and to give me suitable recompense if I succeeded in supporting my conjectures, I would undertake to bring him the whole history of the nameless ship within twelve months; and also to give him such knowledge as would enable him to lay hands on the man called "Captain Black," should this man prove the criminal I believed him to be. To all which tale he listened, his searching eye fixing its stare plump upon me, from time to time; but when I had done, he rang the bell for his clerk, and I could see that he felt himself in the company of a maniac. So I left him, and breathed the breath of liberty again as I went back to the hotel, and told Roderick of the utter and crushing failure waiting upon the very beginning of the task which Martin Hall had left to me.

Roderick was not at all surprised—it seemed to me rather that he was glad.

"What did I tell you?" he said, as he sat up on the couch, and took the tube of his hookah from his mouth; "who will believe such a tale as we are hawking in the market-place—selling, in fact, to the highest bidder? If a man came to you with the same account, and with no more authority to support him than the story of a dead detective—who may have lost his wits, or may never have had any to lose—would you put down a shilling to see him through with the business? Pshaw! my dear old Mark, you, with your long head and that horribly critical eye of yours, you wouldn't give him a groat."

"Exactly, I should consider him a dupe or a stark-staring madman; but the case is different as it stands. I know—I would stake my life on it—that every word Martin Hall wrote is true, true as my life itself. I am not so sure that you are convinced, though."

I awaited his answer, but it did not come for many minutes. He had passed through his momentary enthusiasm and lay at full length upon the couch, making circles, parabolas, and ellipses of fine white smoke, while he fixed his gaze upon the frieze of the wall, as if he were counting the architraves.

"Mark," he said at last, "when we were at Harrow together an aged sage impressed upon us the meaning of Seneca's line, '*Veritas odit moras*.' I regard myself at the moment in a position of truth; but whether on calm reflection I believe the whole of your dead friend's story, I'm hanged if I know, and therefore"—here he made a long pause and smoked violently—"and therefore I have bought a steamer."

"You have done what?"

"At two o'clock to-day, in your absence, I bought the steam-yacht *Rocket*, lately the property of Lord Wilmer, now the property of Roderick Stewart, of the Hotel Columbia, London."

I think I must have laughed sorrowfully at him, as a man laughs at a drawing-room humorist, for he continued quickly—

"Before we go on board her, the yacht will be re-christened by Mary—who will stay with her dear maiden aunt in our absence—and will be named after your vessel *Celsis*. Her crew will consist of our silent friend, Captain York, of his brother as chief mate, and of your men now at Portsmouth, with half a dozen more. We shall need eight firemen, whom the agents will engage, and three engineers, already found, for I have taken on Lord Wilmer's men. Your cook, old 'Cuss-a-lot' will serve us very well during the fourteen or fifteen days we shall need to go across the Atlantic, and we want now only a second and third officer. As these men will be mixed up with us on the quarter-deck, I have told the agents to send them up to see you here—so you'll run your eye over them and tell me if they'll do. I hate seeing people; they bore me, and I mean you to take the charge of this enterprise from the very beginning—you quite understand?"

"Roderick, my old friend, I'm as blank as a drawing-board—would you mind giving me that yarn from the beginning again—and tell me first, why are we going; then, where are we going; and after that, what has your steamer to do with the business of Martin Hall—and, well, and what we know?"

He spoke quickly in answer, and seemed disappointed.

"I hate laver," he said, "and didn't think to find you dense, but you're growing silly at this business anyway. Now, look here; until you read me that paper in your cabin, I don't know that I ever felt anger against any man, but, before God, I'll bring the man who murdered Martin Hall, and Heaven knows how many others, to justice or I'll never know another hour's rest. You have been talking of Governments and ship-owners for twenty-four hours; but what have Governments and ship-owners to do with us? Is it money you want? Well, what's mine is yours; and I'm worth two hundred and fifty thousand pounds if I'm worth a shilling. Is it profit of a dead man's work you're after? Well then, mark your man, learn all about him, run him to his hole; and then, when other people besides yourself know his story, as it must be known in a few months' time, put your price on what is your own, and don't fear to recompense yourself. What I want you to see is this:—For some months, at any rate, we shall get no outside help in this matter from any living creature; what we're going to do must be done at our cost, which is my cost. And what we're going to do isn't to be done at this hotel, or on this couch, or in the City: it's going to be done on the high seas, and after that in America on the Hudson River, where, if Hall be right, is the home of Captain Black. It is to the Hudson River that I mean to go now—at once, as soon as money and the devil's own number of men can get the steam-yacht *Celsis* ready for sea. And at my cost, don't forget that; though I'm a fool in the game, which is yours to make and yours to play, as it has been from the beginning, when the dead man chose you to finish it and to reckon with the scoundrels now afloat somewhere between here and the Banks. In his name I ask you now to close your hand with me on this bargain, to ask no question, to make no protests, and to remember that we sail in three days, if possible, and if not in three, then, in as small a number as will serve to get the steamer ready."

What could I say to story such as this one? I could only wring his hand, and feel how hot it was, knowing that the same haunting wish to be up and off in pursuit was about him as about me. For half-an-hour we sat and smoked together. In three-quarters I was closeted in the room below with Francis Paolo, who had come from the agents to seek the berth of second officer to the new yacht *Celsis*. When the servant gave me this man's name, I had some misgiving at its Italian sound, but I remembered that Italy is breeding a nation of sailors; and I put off the prejudice and hurried down to see him. I found him to be a sprightly, dark-faced, black-haired Italian, apparently no more than twenty-five years old; and he greeted me with much smoothness of speech. He had served three years as third officer to the big steam-yacht owned by the noted Frenchman, the Marquis de Cluneville; and, as he was unmistakably a gentleman, and his discharges were in perfect order, I engaged him there and then for the post of second officer to the *Celsis*, and gave him orders to join her at Plymouth, where she lay, as soon as might be.

But had I known him then as I know him now, I would have paid a thousand pounds never to have seen him!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT PURSUIT.

It was our last day in London. Roderick and I sat down to dinner in the hotel, the touch of depression upon us both. Mary had left us early in the morning to go to Salisbury, where her kinsfolk lived, and I confess that her readiness to quit us without protest somewhat hurt me. I imagine that I was thinking of it, for I blurted out at last, when we had been silent for at least a quarter of an hour—

"I suppose she's arrived by this."

"No, I didn't post her till three," Roderick replied in equal reflective mood.

"Didn't post who?" I asked indignantly.

"Why, old Belle, of course. I sent her down with the guard to get her out of the way."

"Oh," I replied, "I was thinking of Mary, not of your dog."

"You always are," he said; "but, between ourselves I'm glad she went. I thought there'd be a fuss; and if it comes to a row, as it most probably will, girls are in the way. Don't you think so? But, of course, you don't."

I didn't, and made no bones of pretence about it. Mary was a child; there was no doubt about that; but as I girded up my courage for this undertaking, I thought how much those pretty eyes would have encouraged me, and how sweet that childish laugh would have been in mid-Atlantic. But there—that's no part of this story.

We were going down to Plymouth by the nine o'clock mail from Paddington, and there was not a wealth of time to spare. So soon as we had dined, I went up to my room to put the small things of need away, meaning to be no more than five minutes at the work; but, to my amazement, the whole of the place had been turned utterly inside out by one who had been there before me. My trunk lay upside down; my writing-case was unblocked and stripped, my diary was torn and rent, my clothes were scattered. I thought at first that a common cheat of a hotel thief had been busy snapping up trifles; but I got a shock greater than any I had known since Martin Hall's death when I felt for his writing, which lay secure in its case, and found that, while the main narrative was intact, his letters to the police at New York, his plans, and his sketches had been taken. For the moment the discovery made me reel. I could not realise its import, and almost mechanically I rang for a servant, who sent the manager to me.

His perplexity and dismay were no less than mine.

"No one has any right to enter your rooms," he said; "and I will guarantee the honesty of my servants unhesitatingly. Let us ring and ask for the porter."

The porter was emphatic.

"No one has been here after you since yesterday, sir, when the Italian gentleman came," he pleaded. "To-day he sent a man for a parcel he left here, but I know of no one else who has even mentioned your name."

"What is the amount of your loss?" asked the manager, as he began to assist me to make things straight, and the question gave me inspiration. I made a hurried search, and I must have shown feeling, for I was conscious of pallor of face and momentary giddiness.

"You have lost something of great value, then?" he continued, as he watched. And I replied—

"Yes, but to myself only. Nothing has been taken from the room but papers, which may be worth ten thousand pounds to me. They are not worth a penny to anyone else."

"Oh! papers only—that is fortunate; it is, perhaps, a case for your own private detective."

"Quite so ; I shouldn't have troubled you had I made a search before. I will see to it myself—many thanks."

He withdrew with profuse apologies, but I remained standing, with all the heart out of me. What, in Heaven's name, did it mean ? Who had interest to rifle my portfolio and take the papers ? Who could have interest ? Who but the man I meant to hunt down ? And what did he know of me—what ? I asked, repeating the word over again, and so loudly that those in the neighbouring rooms must have heard them.

Was I watched from the very beginning ? Had I to cope, at the very outset, with a man worth a million, the captain of a band of cut-throats, who stood at no devil's deed, no foul work, no crime, as Martin Hall's death clearly proved ? My heart ached at the thought ; I felt the sweat dropping off me ; I stood without thought of any man ; the one word "watched" singing in my ears like the surging of a great sea. And I had forgotten Roderick until he burst into my room, a great laugh on his lips, and a telegram in his hand ; but he stood back as he saw me, and went pale, as I must have been.

"Great Scott !" he said ; "what's the matter ?—what are you doing ? We leave in ten minutes ; why aren't you ready ?"

The excuse gurgled in my throat. I stammered out something, and began to pack as though pursued by Furies. Then I put him off by asking what his humour was about. He laughed again at the question—

"What do you think ?" he said ; "Mary's arrived all right."

"Oh, that's good ; I hope she'll like Salisbury," I replied, bundling shirts, collars, and coats into my trunk with indiscriminate vigour.

"Yes, but you don't wait to hear the end," he continued, with a great roar of laughter ; "she isn't at Salisbury at all ; she's at Plymouth, on board the *Celsis*. She went straight down there, and devil a bit as much as sent her aunt a telegram !"

I rose up at his word, and looked him in the face.

"Well," he said, "what do you think ?—you don't seemed pleased."

"I'm not pleased," I said, going on with my packing. "I don't think she ought to be there."

"I know that ; we've talked it all over, but when I think of it, I don't see where the harm comes in ; we can't meet mischief crossing the Atlantic, and when the danger does begin in New York, I'll see she's well on the lee-side of it."

I did not answer him, for I knew that which he did not know. Perhaps he began to think that he did not do well to treat the matter so lightly, for he was mute when we entered the cab, and he did not open his lips until we were seated in the night mail for Plymouth. The compartment we rode in was reserved for us as he had wished ; and, truth to tell, we neither of us had much liking for talk as the train rolled smoothly westward. We had entered upon this undertaking, so vast, so shadowy, so momentous, with such haste, and moved by such powerful motives, that I know not if some thought of sorrow did not then touch us both. Who could say if we should live to tell the tale, if our fate would not be the fate of Martin Hall, if we should ever so much as see the nameless ship, if chance would ever bring us face to face with Captain Black ? And whither did we go ? When should we set foot again in that England we loved ? God alone could tell ; and, with one great hope in a guiding and all-seeing Providence, I covered myself up in my rug, and slept until dawn came, and the fresh breezes from the Channel waves brought new strength and men's hearts to us again.

It was full day when we went on board the yacht, and I did not fail to cast a quick glance of admiration on her beautiful lines and perfect shape as I clambered up the ladder, at the top of which stood Captain York.

"Welcome aboard," he said, giving us hearty hand-shakes ; and without further inspection at that hour we followed him to the cabin, where steaming coffee brought the blood to our hands and feet, and put us in better mood.

"So my sister's here," said Roderick, as he filled his cup for the third time.

"Yes, last night, no orders," jerked the skipper with his usual brevity.

"Ah, we must see to that—and the second officer——"

"Still ashore; he left a bit of writing; he'll be aboard midday!"

He had the writing in his hand, and was about to crumple it, but I caught sight of it, and snatched it from him. It was in the same handwriting as the letter which Captain Black had sent to me at the *Hôtel Scribe* in Paris.

"What's the matter?" said Roderick, as he heard me exclaim; but the skipper looked hard at me, and was much mystified.

"Do you know anything of the man?" he asked very slowly, as he leant back in his chair, but I had already seen the folly of my ejaculation, and I replied—

"Nothing at all, although I have seen that handwriting before somewhere; I could tell you where, perhaps, if I thought."

Roderick nodded his head meaningly, and deftly turned the subject. I yawned with a great yawn, and the episode passed as we both rose to go to our cabins. It is not well to greet the waking day with eyes that are half-closed in sleep; and, although the skipper seemed to desire some fuller knowledge as to the ends of our cruise and the course of it, we put him off, and left him to the coffee and the busy work of the final preparation. But Roderick followed me to my berth and had the matter of the handwriting out. I told him at once of the robbery of some of the papers, and the coincidence of the letter which the second mate had left with the skipper. He was quick-witted enough to see the danger; but he was quite reckless in the methods he proposed to meet it.

"There's no two thoughts about this matter at all," he said; "we've evidently run right into a trap, but luckily there's time to get out again—of course we shall sail without a second mate?"

"That's one way out of the hole, no doubt; but it's very serious to find that our very first move in the matter is known to others. Hall said well that his diamond-buyer could command and be obeyed in ten cities: and there isn't much question that we've got one of his men aboard this ship—but I don't know that we shouldn't keep him."

"Keep him! What for?—to watch everything we do, and hear everything we say, and arrange for the cutting of our throats when we land at New York? You've a fine notion of diplomacy, Mark!"

"Perhaps so; but we won't quarrel about that. There's one thing you forget in this little calculation of yours—our men are as true as steel; this rogue couldn't turn one of them if he staked his life on it. Suppose he has come here to use his eyes, and hang about keyholes; well, we know him, fortunately; and what can he learn unless he learns it from you or me? There's not another soul aboard knows anything. You will tell the skipper that we cross to America for a pleasure trip; you will help me to keep so close an eye on Master Francis Paolo, second mate, that if he lose a hair of his head we shall know it. In that way it may turn out that we shall get from him the link which is lost in the chain; and when he would draw us, we shall pump him as dry as a sand-pit. At least, that's my way of thinking, and I don't think it's such a poor notion after all."

"It's not poor at all—it never came to me like that. Of course, you're right; let's take the man aboard, but I wish we could have left Mary behind—don't you?"

That I did, but what could I tell him? It was bad enough to be hugging all those fears and thoughts of danger to my own heart, without setting him all a-ferment with apprehension and unrest; so I laughed off his question, and after a six hours' sleep I went aft to the quarter-deck, to take stock of the yacht and get some better acquaintance with her.

She was a finely-built ship of some seven hundred tons: and was schooner-rigged, so that she could either sail or steam. Her engines were unusually large for so small a vessel, being triple-compound; while the main saloon, aft, and the small library attached to it, showed in the luxurious fitting that her late owner had been a man of fine taste. In the very centre of her, there was a deck-house for the chart-room, the skipper's and engineers' quarters, and for a couple of spare cabins; but

generally the accommodation was below, there being three small cabins with two berths apiece each side the saloon, and room for the steward and his men amidships. The fore-castle was large, and airy, giving ample berthing for the stokers and seamen; while the whole ornament of the deck was bright-looking with brass, and smart rails, and pots of flowers, these last showing clearly that Mary had been at work. Indeed, I had scarce made my inspection of our new ship when she burst up from below, and began her explanation, standing with flushed cheeks, while the wind played in her hair, and her eyes danced with the merriment of it.

"Come aboard," she said, mocking the seaman's "*Adsum*," and I said—

"That's evident; the question is, when are you going ashore again?"

"I don't know, but I guess I'll get ashore at New York, because I mean to go to Niagara——"

"You think you'll go ashore at New York, not 'you guess,' Mary."

"But I do guess, and I don't think, and I wish you wouldn't interrupt me with your perpetual grammar. What's the good of grammar? No one had a good time with grammar yet."

"That's not exactly the purpose of grammar——"

"No, nor of orthography, nor deportment; I learnt all these at a guinea a quarter extra when I was at school, so you're just wasting your time, because I'm finished."

"Finished?"

"Yes, didn't Roderick tell you that I went to a finishing school? You wouldn't finish me all over again, would you?"

"Not for anything—but the question is, why did you come aboard here, and why didn't you go to Salisbury? What is your old aunt thinking now?"

She laughed saucily, throwing back her head so that her hair fell well about her shoulders; and then she would have answered me, but I turned round, hearing a step, and there stood our new second mate, Francis Paolo. Our eyes met at once with a long, searching gaze, but he did not flinch. If he were a spy, he was no poor actor, and he stood his ground without the movement of a muscle.

"Well?" I said.

"Is Mr. Stewart awake yet, sir?" he said, asking for Roderick.

"I don't know, but you may wake him if he isn't."

"The skipper wants a word with him when he gets up," he continued; "we are all ready to heave anchor when he speaks."

"That's all right: I'll give you the word, so you can weigh now; perhaps, Mary, you'll go and hammer at Roderick's door, or he'll sleep until breakfast time to-morrow."

She ran at the word, and the new second mate turned to go, but first he followed the girl with his eyes, earnestly, as though he looked upon some all-fascinating picture.

I watched him walk forward, and followed him, listening as he directed the men; and a more seaman-like fellow I have never seen. If he were an Italian, he had left all accent of speech in his own country, and he gave his orders smartly and in a tone which demanded obedience. About his seamanship I never had a doubt from the first; and I say this now, a more capable officer than Francis Paolo never took a watch.

Yet he was a man of violent temper, soon displayed before me.

As I watched him from the hurricane deck, I heard a collier who had not yet left the ship give him some impudence, and look jauntily to the men for approval; but the smile was not off his cheeks when the new mate hit him such a terrific blow on the head with a spy-glass he held that the fellow reeled through the open bulwarks right into his barge, which lay alongside.

"That's to set your face straight," cried the mate after him; "next time you laugh aboard here I'll balance you on the other side."

The men were hushed before a display of temper like this; the skipper on the bridge flushed red with disapproval, but said nothing.

The order "Hands heave anchor!" was sung out a moment after, and as Roderick joined me aft, the new *Celsis* steamed away from Plymouth and the episode was forgotten.

For truly, as we lost sight of the town and the beautiful yacht moved slowly upon the broader bosom of the Channel, thoughts of great moment held us; and I, for my part, fell to wondering if I should ever see the face of my country again.

And in that hour the great pursuit began.

CHAPTER VIII.

I DREAM OF PAOLO.

WE had left the Scilly Light two days; the *Celsis* steamed steadily on the great broad of the Atlantic. Night had fallen, and Mary had gone below, leaving me with Roderick upon the aft-deck, watching the veriest rim of a moon which gave no pretence of a picture, no ornament to the deck.

It was Paolo's watch; and the skipper had turned in, so that, save for the occasional ringing of a bell or a call from the look-out, no sound but the whirring of the screw and the surge of the swell fell upon our ear. A night for dreamy thoughts of home, of kinsfolk, of the more tender things of life; but for us a night for the talk of that great "might be" which was then so powerful a source of speculation for both of us. And we were eager to talk, eager then as ever since the beginning of it all; eager, above all things for the moment, to know when we should next hear of Captain Black or of the nameless ship.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Roderick after twenty surmises of the sort, "if we heard something of her as we cross. I have given York orders to keep well in the track of steamers; and if your friend Hall be right, that is just where the unknown ship will keep. I would give a thousand pounds to know the story of the man Black. What can he be? Is he mad? Is it possible that a man could commit piracy, to-day, in the Atlantic, where is the traffic of the world; where, if the Powers once learnt of it, they could hunt him down in a day? And yet, put into plain English, that is the tale your friend tells."

"It is; I have never doubted that from the first. Captain Black is either the most original villain living, or the whole story is a silly dream—besides, we have yet to learn if he is the commander of the nameless ship: we have also to learn if the nameless ship is not a myth. Time alone will tell, and our wits."

"If they are not knocked out of us in the attempt, for, see you, Mark, a man with a hole in his head is a precious poor person, and, of course, you are prepared either way, success or the other thing."

"For either; but I trust one of us may come out of it, for Mary's sake."

The thought made him very silent, and presently he turned in. I remained above for half an hour, gazing over the great sweep of the Atlantic. Paolo was on the bridge, as I have said, and, in accordance with my design, I took all opportunity of watching him. That night some inexplicable impulse held me awake when all others slept. I made pretence, first of all, to go to my cabin; and bawled a good-night to the mate as I went; but it was only to put on felt slippers and to get a warm coat,

and, with these secured, I made my way stealthily amidships ; and took a stand aft of the skipper's cabin, where I could pry, yet not be seen. Not that I got much for my pains ; but I heard Paolo address several of the men forward, and it seemed to me that his mode of speech was not quite that which should be between officer and seaman. Perchance he was guilty of nothing more than common affability ; but yet I would rather have had him gruff and meddlesome than free and intimate.

It chanced that in this watch the new men were on deck, my old crew being in the port watch, or I would have questioned them there and then. As it was, I let the matter go, and smoked ; and, indeed, when another bell had struck, I was more than rewarded for my pains. Suddenly, on the far horizon over the starboard bow, I saw the flare of a blue light, bright over the water ; and showing as it flared, the dark hull of a great ship. The light was unmistakably, I thought, the signal of an ocean-going steamer which had sighted another of her company still far away from us ; but I had no more than time to come to this conclusion when, to my profound amazement, Paolo himself struck light to a flare which he had with him on the bridge, and answered the signal, our own light showing far out, and lighting the great moving sea on which we rode so that one could count every crest about it.

The action completely staggered me. Without a thought I rushed up the ladder to the hurricane deck and stood beside him. He started as he saw me, and I could see him biting his lips, while an ugly look came into his eyes. But I charged him at once.

"Good evening, Mister Mate," I said ; "will you kindly tell me why you burnt that blue light ?"

His excuse came readily.

"I burnt it to answer the signal yonder."

"But that was no affair of ours !"

He shrugged his shoulders, and muttered something about custom and something else, which he meant to be impudent. Yet in another moment he made effort to recall himself, and met me with an open, smiling face which covered anger. I began to upbraid myself for the folly of it, bursting out thus when there was no call for show ; and I turned the talk to other things, searching to learn about him and his past ; yet it was without reward, for he fenced in speech with all the point of a close Scotsman. But we came down the bridge together when the new watch was set ; and he took a glass of wine with me in the saloon.

It was all well acted, a fine pretence of common civility, yet I believe that we, two then took acquaintance of each other in the fullest measure ; and he learnt, though he did not show it, that in the game of eavesdropping there may be two that play.

When I turned in at last, the little wind there was had fallen away, so that the yacht was almost without motion ; save, indeed, that long roll from which an ocean-going ship is rarely free. I had the electric light in my cabin with a tap on the end of my bunk, mighty convenient for reading and waking ; but I was full of sleep in spite of what had been above, and I turned out the lamp directly I fell upon my bed.

I think I must have slept very heavily for an hour, when a great sense of unrest and waking weariness took me, and I lay, now dozing, now dreaming, so that in all my dreams I say the face of Paolo. I seemed to walk the deck of the *Celsis*, yet was Paolo there more strong and masterful than I ; again I went to the stoke-hole, and he was charging the men with much authority ; I hurried thence to the saloon, and in my silly dream I thought to see Captain Black upon the one hand and Paolo on the other, and a great friendship of manner and discourse between them.

Again I slept the black sleep ; but it passed into other visions, so that in one of them I seemed to be lying awake in my own cabin, and the man Paolo stood over me, looking straight into my eyes ; and when I would have risen up to question him I was powerless, held still in every limb, living, yet without life or speech—a horrid dream from which I seemed to rouse myself only at the touch of something cold upon my outstretched hand ; and then at last I opened my eyes and saw, during the

veriest reality of time, that others looked down into mine. I saw them for some small part of a second, yet in the faint light that came from the port I recognised the face and the form, and was certain of them; for the man who had been watching me as I slept was Paolo.

A quick sense of danger waked me thoroughly then. I put my hand to the tap of the electric light and the white rays flooded the cabin. But the cabin was empty and Roderick's dog sat by my trunk, and had, I could see, been licking my hand as I lay.

I knew not how to make out the meaning of it; but I was trembling from the horror of the dream, and went above in my flannels. It was dawn then; and day was coming up out of the sea, cold and bearing mists, which lay low over the long restful waves. Dan was aft on the quarter-deck, and the first officer was on the bridge, but I looked into Paolo's bunk, and he slept there, in so heavy a sleep that I began to doubt altogether the truth of what I had believed. How could this man have left my cabin as he had done, and yet now be berthed in his own? The dream had cheated me, as dreams often do.

But more sleep was not to be thought of. I fell to talk with Dan, and paced the deck with him, asking what was his opinion of our new second mate.

He scratched his head before he answered, and looked wise, as he loved to look—

"Lord, sir, it's not for me to be spoutin' about them as is above me; but you ask me a fair question, and I'll give you a fair answer. In course, I ain't the party to be thinking ill of any man—not Dan, which is plain and English, though some as is scholars say it should be Dan'el; but what I do know, I know—you won't be contradictin' that, will you?"

I told him to get on with it; but he was woefully deliberate, cutting tobacco to chew, and hitching himself up before he was under weigh again.

"Now," he said at last, "the fact about our second is this, in my opinion—which ain't mine, but the whole of 'em—he's no more'n a ship with a voice under the fore-hatch—"

I laughed at him as I asked, "And what's the matter with a ship like that? Why shouldn't there be a voice under the fore-hatch, Dan?"

He lit his pipe behind the aft skylight, and then answered, as he puffed clouds of smoke to the lee-side—

"Well, you see, sir, as there ain't nobody a-livin' in that perticler place, you don't go for to look to hearin' of voices, or, in plain lingo, there's something queer about it."

"And that's your opinion, Dan?"

"As true as this fog's a-liftin' to windward."

I looked as he jerked his thumb to port, and, sure enough, the curtain of the fog was drawn up from the sea as the wind's wand scattered it. Glorious and joy-giving the sun arose, and the whole horizon-bound expanse of rolling, green water lay beneath us. There is something of God in every daybreak, as most men admit, but I know nothing, against the glory of a morn upon the Atlantic for bringing home to a man the delight in mere existence. The very sense of strength which the breeze bears, the limitless deep green of the unmeasured seas, the great arch of the zenith, the clear view of the sun's march, the purity and the stillness and the mastery of it all, the consciousness of the puny power of man, the mind message recalling the sublimity and the awe of the unseen Power beyond—all these things impress you, move in you the deepest thoughts, turn you from the little estimates of self as Nature only can, in the holiest of her moods, which are sought yet never found in the cities. Nor can I ever welcome the breath of the great sea's vigour, and refuse to listen to her voice, which comes with so powerful a message, even as a message from the great Unknown, whose hand controls, and whose spirit is on the waters.

The sound of a gun-shot to leeward awoke me from my thoughts. The fog was yet lying there upon the sea, and for some while none of us, expectant as we were,

could discern aught. But, fearing that some vessel lay in distress, we put the helm up and went half-speed for a time. We had cruised thus for five minutes or more when a terrific report burst upon our ears, and this time to the alarm of every man who trod deck. For this second report was not that of a small gun such as crippled ships may use, but the thunderous echoing of a great weapon which a man-of-war only could carry.

The sound died away slowly; but in the same minute the fog lifted; and I saw, away a mile on the starboard bow, a spectacle which brought a great flush upon my face, and let me hear the sound of my own heart beating.

CHAPTER IX.

I FALL IN WITH THE NAMELESS SHIP.

THERE were two great ships abreast of each other, and they were steaming with so great a pressure of steam that the dark green water was cleaved into two huge waves of foam before their bows; and the spray ran right over their fo'castles and fell in tons upon their decks.

The more distant of the two ships was long in shape and dark in colour; she had four masts upon which topsails and staysails were set, and two funnels painted white, but marked with the anchor which clearly set her down to be one of the famous Black Anchor fleet. My powerful spyglass gave me a full view of her decks, which I saw to be dark with the figures of passengers and crew all crowding to the port side, wherefrom the other ship was approaching her.

Yet was it this other ship which drew our gaze rather than the great steamer which seemed to be pursued. Almost of the same length as the passenger steamer, which she now approached obliquely, she rode the long swell with perfect grace, and many of her deck-houses and part of her prow shone with the brightness of pure gold. Full the sun fell upon her in a sheen of shimmering splendour, throwing great reflected lights which dazzled the eye so that it could scarce hold any continued gaze upon her. And, indeed, every ornament on her seemed to be made of the precious metal, now glowing to exceeding brilliance in the full power of the sunlight.

She was a very big ship, as I have said, and she had all the shape of a ship of war, while the turrets fore and aft of her capacious funnel showed the muzzles of two big guns. I could see by my glass a whole wealth of armament in the foretop of her short mast forward; and high points in her fo'castle marked the spot where many other machine guns were ready for action. At her towering and lofty prow there was indicated clearly the curve of the ram which now ploughed the dark water and curdled it into the fountains of foam which fell upon her decks; while amidships, the outline of a conning-tower showed more clearly for what aggressive purpose she had been designed. There was at this spot, too, a great deck erection, with a gallery and a bridge for navigation; but no men showed upon the platform, and, for the matter of that, no soul trod her decks, so far as our observation went. Yet her speed was such as I do not believe any ship achieved before. I have spent many years upon the sea; have crossed the Atlantic in some of the most speedy of those cruisers which are the just pride of a later-day shipbuilding art; I have raced in

torpedo-boats over known miles ; but of this I have no measure of doubt, that the speed of which that extraordinary vessel then proved herself capable was such as no other that ever swam could for one moment cope with. Now rising majestically on the long roll of the swell, now falling into the concave of the sea, she rushed onward towards the steamer she was evidently pursuing as though driven by all the furies of the deep.

As we watched her, held rooted to our places as men who are looking upon some strange and uncanny picture, the gun in her foremost turret belched out flame and smoke, and we observed the rise and fall of a shell, which cut the water a cable's length ahead of the straining steamer and sank hissing beneath the sea. At that moment she ran up a flag upon her signal mast, and, as I read it with my glass, I saw that it was the flag of the Chilean Republic.

Now, indeed the pursuit became so engrossing that my own men began to sing out, and this reminded me that every soul aboard the *Celsis* had watched with me when I first set eyes on the nameless ship. I turned to our skipper, who stood near on the hurricane deck, and saw that he in turn was looking hard at me. Roderick had come up from his cabin, but rested at the top of the companion ladder in so dazed a mood that no speech came from him. The first officer had scarce his wits about him to steer our own course, and the whole of the hands forward in a little group upon the fo'castle now called out their views, then turned to ask what it meant.

It was a matter of satisfaction to me that Mary still slept, and I looked for the appearance of Paolo with some question. But he remained below through it all. And at that I wondered more.

The skipper was the first to speak.

"That ship yonder," said he, jerking his thumb to starboard ; "is it any business of ours ?"

"None that I know of," I replied ; "but it's a mighty fine sight, skipper, don't you think, a Chilean warship running after a liner in broad daylight ? What's your opinion ?"

He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and took another sight through his glass. Then he answered me—

"It's a fine sight enough, God knows, but I would give half I'm worth to be a hundred miles away from it ;" and here he suddenly wheeled, and, facing me roughly, he asked—

"Do you want me to get this boat into port again !"

"Of course. Is there any great need to answer a question like that ?"

"At the moment, yes ; for, with your pleasure, I'm going to put up the helm and sheer off. I'm not a man that loves fighting myself, and, with a ship and crew to look after, I've no business in any affair of that sort ; but it's for you to say."

Before I could answer him, Roderick moved from his place and came up on the bridge where we stood.

"Hold on a bit, skipper," he cried, "as we are, if you please ; why, man, it's a sight I wouldn't miss for a fortune."

The skipper searched him with his eyes with a keen, lasting gaze, that implied his doubt of the pair of us. His voice had a fine ring of sarcasm in it when he replied after the silence ; but all he said was, "It's your affair," and then turned to the first officer.

"Don't you think he was right ?" I asked Roderick in a low voice, when the chief's back was turned, but he whispered again—

"Not yet—we must see more of it ; and they're too much occupied to hunt after us. We'll be away long before those two have settled accounts ; and, look now, I can see a man on the bridge of the yellow ship. Do you mark him ?"

I had my glass to my eye in a moment, and the light was so full upon the vessel, which must then have been a mile and a half away from us, that I could prove his words ; for, sure enough, there was now someone moving upon the bridge, and, as I fixed my powerful lens, I thought that I could recognise the shape of a man ; but I would not speak my mind to Roderick until I had a nearer view.

"You are right," I answered; "but what sort of a man I will tell you presently. Did you ever see anything like the pace that big ship is showing? She must be moving at twenty-five knots."

"Yes, it is amazing; and, what's more, there isn't a show of smoke at her funnel."

This was true, but I had not noticed it. Throughout the strange scene we saw, this vessel of mystery never gave one sign that men worked at her furnaces below. Steam nor smoke came from her, no evidence, even the most trifling, of that terrible power which was then driving her through the seas at such a fearful speed.

But of the activity of her human crew we had speedily further sign; for, almost as I answered, there was some belching of flame from her turret, and this time the shell, hurtling through the air with that hissing song which every gunner knows so well, crashed full upon the fore-part of the great liner, and we heard the shout of terror which rose from those upon her decks. The men appeared at the signal-mast of the pursuer, and rapidly made signals in the common code.

"Skipper, do you see that?—they're signalling," I cried out. "Get your glass up, and take a sight;" but he had already done so.

"It's the signal to lie to, and wait a bout," he said; "there's someone going aboard."

The fulfilment of the reading was instant. While yet we had not realised the onward rush of the two boats was stayed the foam fell away from their bows; and they rode the seas superbly, sitting the long swells with a beautiful ease. But there was activity on the deck of the nameless ship, and men were at the davits on the starboard side swinging off a launch, which dropped presently into the sea with a crew of some half-a-dozen men. For ourselves, we were now quite close up to them, but so busily were they occupied that I believed we had escaped all notice. Yet I got my glass full upon the man who walked the bridge; and I knew him.

He was the man I had met in the Rue Joubert at Paris, the one styled Captain Black by my friend Hall.

The last link in the long chain was welded then. The whole truth of that weird document, so fantastical, so seemingly wild, so fearful, was made manifest; the dead man's words were vindicated, his every deduction was unanswerable. There on the great Atlantic waste, I had lived to see one of those terrible pictures which he had conceived in his long dreaming; and through all the excitement, above all the noise, I thought that I heard his voice and the grim "Ahoys!" of my own seamen on the night he died.

This strange recognition was unknown to Roderick, who had never seen Captain Black, nor had any notion of his appearance. But he waited for some remark from me; yet, fearing to be heard, I only looked at him and in that look he read all.

"Mark," he said, "it's time to go; we'll be the next when that ship's at the bottom."

"My God!" I answered, "he can't do such a thing as that. If I thought so, I would stand by here at the risk of a thousand lives——"

"That's wild talk. What can we do? He would shiver us up with one of his machine guns—and, besides, we have Mary on board."

Indeed, she stood by us as we spoke, very pale and quiet, looking where the two ships lay motionless, the boat from the one now at the very side of the black steamer, whose name, the *Ocean King*, we could plainly read. She had, unnoticed by us, seen the work of the last shell, which splintered the groaning vessel, and made her reel upon the water, and her instinct told her that we stood where danger was.

"Don't you think you're better below, Mary?" asked Roderick; but she had her old answer—

"Not until you go; and why should I make any difference? I overheard what you said. Am I to stand between you and those men's lives?"

She clung to my arm as she spoke, and her boldness gave us new courage.

"I am for standing by to the end," said I; "if we save one soul, it's an English work to do, anyway."

Roderick looked at Mary, and then he turned to the skipper—

"Do you wish to go on the other tack now?" he asked; but the skipper was himself again.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it's your yacht, and these are your men; if you care to keep them afloat, keep them. If it's your fancy to do the other thing, why, do it. It's a matter of indifference to me."

His words were heard by all the hands, and from that time there was something of a clamour amongst them; but I stepped forward to have out what was in my mind, and they heard me quietly.

"Men," I said, "there's ugly work over there, work which I make nothing of; but it's clear that an English ship is running from a foreigner, and may want help. Shall we leave her, or shall we stand by?"

They gave a great shout at this, and the skipper touched the bell, which stopped engines. We lay then quite near both to the pursued and the pursuer, and there was no longer any doubt that we had been seen.

Glasses were turned upon us from the decks of the yellow ship, and from the poop of the *Ocean King*, whose men were still busy with the signal flags, and this time, as we made out, in a direct request to us that we should stand by.

I doubt not that the excitement and the danger of the position alone nerved us to this work of amazing foolhardiness, which was so like to have ended in our complete undoing; and, as I watched the captain of the steamer parleying with the men in the launch below him, I could but ask—What next? when will our turn be?

But the scene was destined to end in a way altogether different from what we had anticipated.

While a tall man with fair hair—my glass gave me the impression that he was the fellow known as "Roaring John"—stood in the bows of the launch, and appeared to be gesticulating wildly to the skipper of the *Ocean King*, the nameless ship set up of a sudden a great shrieking with her deck whistle, which she blew three times with terrific power; and at the third sound of it the launch, which had been holding to the side of the steamer, let go, running rapidly back to the armed vessel, where it was taken aboard again.

The whole thing was done in so short a space of time that our men had scarce an opportunity to express surprise when the launch was hanging at the davits again. The great activity that we had observed on the decks of the war-vessel ceased as mysteriously as it had begun. Again there was no sign of living being about her; but she moved at once, and bounded past us at a speed the like of which I had never seen upon the deep.

So remarkable a face-about seemed to dumbfound our men. They stood staring at each other like those amazed, and seeking explanation. But the key to the riddle was given, not by one of them, but by Paolo, whom I now found at my elbow, his usually placid face all aglow with excitement.

"Ha!" he cried, "she's American!"

He made a wild point at the far horizon over our stern; and then I saw what troubled him. There was a great white steamer coming up at a high speed, and I knew the form of her at once, and of two others that followed her. She was one of the American navy, crossing to her own country from Europe, whither she had been to watch the British manoeuvres. The secret of the flight was no longer inexplicable: the yellow ship had fled from the trap into which she was so nearly falling.

"You have sharp eyes, Paolo," said I; "I imagine it's lucky for the pair of us."

He shrugged his shoulders angrily, and then said very meaningly—

"Perhaps."

I had no time to reckon with him, for I was as much absorbed as he was in the scene which followed. The nameless ship, of a sudden, ceased her flight, and came almost to a stand some half a mile away on our port-bow. For a moment her purpose was hidden, yet only for a moment. As she swung round to head the seas, I saw at once that another cruiser, long and white, and seemingly well-armed had come up upon that side, and now barred her passage. At last, she was to cope with

one worthy of her, and at the promise of battle, a hush, awful in its intensity, fell upon all of us.

For some minutes the two vessels lay, the one broadside to the other, the Americans making signals which were unanswered ; but the nameless ship had now hundreds of men about her decks, and these were at the machine-guns and elsewhere active in preparation. It became plain that her captain had made up his mind to some plan, for the great hull swung round slowly, and passed at a moderate speed past the bow of the other. When she was nearly clear, her two great guns were fired almost simultaneously, and, as the shells swept along the deck of the cruiser, they carried men and masts and deck-houses with them, in one devilish confusion of wreckage and of death. To such an onslaught there was no answer. The cruiser was utterly unprepared for the treachery, and lay reeling on the sea ; screams and fearful cries coming from her decks, now quivering under a torrent of fire as her opponent treated her to the hail of her machine-guns.

The battle could have ended but in one way, had not the other American war-ships now come so close to us that they opened fire with their great guns. The huge shells hissed over our heads, and all about us, plunging into the sea with such mighty concussions that fountains of green water arose in twenty places, and the near surface of the Atlantic became turbulent with foam. Such a powerful onslaught could have been resisted by no single vessel, and, seeing that he was like to be surrounded, the captain of the nameless ship, which had already been struck three times in her armour, fired twice from his turrets, and then headed off at that prodigious speed he had shown in the beginning of his flight. In five minutes he was out of gun-shot ; in ten, the American vessels were taking men from their crippled cruiser, whose antagonists had almost disappeared on the horizon !

Upon our own decks the noise and hubbub were almost deafening. From a state of nervous tension and doubt our men had passed to a state of joy. Half of them were for going aboard the damaged vessels at once ; half for getting under weigh and moving from such dangerous waters. Our talk upon the quarter-deck soon brought us to the first-named course, and we put out a boat with ease upon the still sea, and hailed the passenger steamer after twenty minutes' stout rowing. She was yet a pitiful spectacle ; for as we drew near to her, I could see women weeping hysterically on the seats aft, and men alternately helping them and looking over in the direction whence the three American ironclads steamed. Indeed, it was a picture of great confusion and distress, and we hailed those on her bridge three times before we got any answer. When we did get up on her main-deck, Captain Ross, her commander, greeted us with great thanks ; but he was a sorry spectacle of a man, being white as his own ensign with anger, and his voice trembled as the voice of a man suffering some great emotion. He took us to his chart-room, for he would have all particulars about us, both our names and addresses, with those of our officers, for a witness when he should call the British Government to take action.

"Twenty years," he said, with tears of anger in his eyes, "twenty years I have crossed the Atlantic, but this is the first time that I ever heard the like. Good God, sirs ! it's nothing less than piracy on the high seas ; and they shall swing, every man Jack of them, as high as Haman ! What think ye ? They signal me to lie to—me that has the mails and a hundred thousand pounds in specie aboard ; they fire a shot across my bows, and when I signal that I'll see them in hell before I bate a knot, why—you watched it yourselves—they struck me in the fore-castle, and there's two of my dead men below now ; but they shall swing"—and he brought his fist upon the table with a mighty thud—"they shall swing, if there's only one rope in Europe."

I had sorrow for the man who was thus moved—for the most part, I could see, at the loss of his two men. Then I went forward with the others to the place of wreckage, and for the first time in my life I observed the colossal havoc which a shell may leave in its path. The single shot which had struck the steamer had cut her two skins of steel as though they had been skins of cheese ; had splintered the wood of the men's bunks, so that it lay in match-like fragments which a fine knife

might have hewed ; had passed again through the steel on the starboard side, and so burst, leaving the fo'castle one tumbled mass of torn blankets, little rags of linen, fragments of wood, of steel, of clothes which had been in the men's chests ; and more horrible to recount, particles of human flesh. Three men were below when the crash came, and two of them had their limbs torn apart ; while, by one of the miracles which oft attend the passage of a shot, the third, being in a low bunk when the shell struck, escaped almost uninjured. This desolate and wrecked cabin was shown to us by Captain Ross, whose anger mounted at every step.

"What does it mean ?" he kept asking. "Are we at war ? You saw the Chilian flag. Is there no Treaty of Paris, then ? Does he go out to filch every ship he meets ? Will he do this, and our Government take no steps ? Can't you answer me that ?" But he poured out his questions with such rapidity, and he was so overcome, that we followed him in silence as he walked beneath the awnings of the upper decks, and showed us women still talking hysterically, men unnerved and witless as children, seamen yet finding curses for the atrocity that had been. By this time, the first of the American ships had come up with us, and the commander of her put out a boat, and having gone aboard the maimed cruiser, he came afterwards to the Black Anchor ship, and joined us in the chart-room. I will make no attempt to set down for you his surprise nor his incredulity. I believe that the scene in the fo'castle alone convinced him that we were not all raving madmen ; but, when once he grasped our story, he was not a whit behind us, either in intensity of expression or of sympathy.

"It's an international question, I guess," he said ; "and if he doesn't pay with his neck for the twenty men dead on my cruiser, to say nothing of the twenty thousand pounds or more of damage to her, I will—why, we'll run him down in four-and-twenty hours. You took his course ?"

"West by south-west, almost dead," said the captain ; and I heard it agreed between them that the second cruiser of the American fleet should start at once in pursuit, while the ironclads should accompany us to New York, so making a little convoy for safety's sake.

With this arrangement we left the ship and regained the *Celsis*. Paolo stood at the top of the ladder as I came on deck, and listened, I thought, to our protestations that the danger was over with something of a sneer on his face.

Indeed, I thought that I heard him mutter, as he went to his cabin, "*Vedremo*—" but I did not know then how much the laugh was to be against us, and that we should leave the convoy long before we reached New York.

CHAPTER X.

THE SPREAD OF THE TERROR.

For full five days we steamed with the other vessels, under no stress to keep the sea with them, since they made no more than twelve knots, for the sake of the cruiser which had been so fearfully maimed in the short action with the nameless ship. During this time, there was little power of wind ; and the breeze, continuing soft from the north-east, it was easy business to hold sight of the convoy, which we did

to the satisfaction of every man aboard us. But I could not put away from myself the knowledge that the events of the first three days had made much talk in the fo'castle and that a feeling akin to terror prevailed amongst the men.

This came home to me with some force on the early morning of the fifth day. I found myself unable to sleep restfully in my bunk, and went above at daybreak, to see the white hulls of the American war-vessels a mile away on the port-quarter and the long line of the Black Anchor boat a few cables'-lengths ahead of them. Paolo was on the bridge, but I did not hail him, thinking it better to give the man few words until we sighted Sandy Hook. He, in turn, maintained his sullen mood; but he did not neglect to be much amongst the hands, and his intimacy with them increased from day to day.

Now, when I came on deck this morning, I found that the breeze, strong and fresh though it was, put me in that soporific state I had sought unavailingly in my bunk. There was a deck-chair well placed behind the shelter of the saloon skylight, and upon this I made myself at ease, drawing my peaked hat upon my eyes, and getting the sleep-music from the swish of the sea, as it ran upon us, and sprinted from the tiller right away to the bob-stay. But no sleep could I get; for scarce was I set upon the chair when I heard Dan the other side of the skylight, and he was holding forth with much fine phrase to Roderick's dog, Belle.

"Yes," he said, apparently treating the beast as though possessed of all human attributes. "Yes, you don't go for to say nothing, but you're a Christian dog, I don't doubt; and yer heart's in the right place; or it's not me as would be wasting me time talking to yer. Now, what I says is, you're comfortable enough, with Missie a-makin' as much of yer as if good fresh beef weren't tenpence a pound, and yer mouth warn't large enough to take in a hundredweight; but that ain't the way with the rest of us—no, my old woman, not by a cable's-length; we're afloat on a run job, old lady; and some of us won't go for to pipe when it's the day for payin' off—not by a long way. So you hear; and don't get answerin' of me, for what I spoke's logic, and there's an end of it."

I called him to me, and had it out with him there and then.

"What's in the wind now, Dan," I asked, "that you're preaching to the dog?"

"Ay, that's it," he replied, putting his hand into his pocket for his tobacco-box.

"What's in the wind?—why, you'd have to be askin' of it to learn, I fancy."

"Is there any more nonsense amongst the men forward?"

"There's a good deal of talk—maybe more than there should be."

"And what do they talk about? Tell me straight, Dan."

"Well, I've got nothing, for my part, to hide away, and I don't know as they should have; but you know this ship is a dead man's!"

"Who told you that stuff?"

"No other than our second mate, sir, as sure as I cut this quid. Not as yarns like that affect me; but, you see, some skulls is thick as plate-armour, and some is thin as egg-shells: and when the thin 'uns gets afloat with corpses, why, it's a chest of shiners to a handspike as they cracks—now, ain't it?"

"Dan, this is the most astounding story that I have yet heard. Would you make it plainer? for, upon my life, I can't read your course!"

He sat down on the edge of the skylight—long service had given him a claim to familiarity—and filled his pipe from my tobacco-pouch before he answered, and then was mighty deliberate.

"Plain yarns, Mister Mark, is best told in the fo'castle, and not by hands upon the quarter-deck; but, asking pafdon for the liberty, I feel more like a father to you gentlemen than if I was nat'ral born to it; and this I do say—What's this trip mean; what's in yer papers? and why ain't it the pleasure vige we struck flag for? For it ain't a pleasure vige, *that* a shoreman could see; and you ain't come across the Atlantic for the seein' of it, nor for merchandise nor barter, nor because you wanted to come. That's what the hands say at night when the second's a-talkin' to 'em over the grog he finds 'em. 'Where's it going to end?' says he; 'what is yer wages for takin' yer lives where they shouldn't be took? and,' says he, 'in a ship what the

last skipper died aboard of it,' says he, 'died so sudden, and was so fond of his old place as who knows where he is now, afloat or ashore, p'raps a-walking this very cabin, and not bringing no luck for the vige, neither,' says he. And what follows?—why, white-livered jawings, and this man afeard to go here, and that man afeard to go there, and the Old One amongst 'em, so that half of 'em says, 'We was took false,' and the other half, 'Why not 'bout ship and home again?' No, and you ain't done with it, not by a long day, and you won't have done with it until you drop anchor in Yankee-land, if ever you do drop anchor there, which I take leave to give no word upon."

"It's a curious state of things. You mean to say, I suppose, that there's terror amongst them—plain terror, and nothing else."

"Ay, sure!"

"Then it remains for us to face them. What's your opinion on that?"

"My opinion is, as you won't go for to do it, but will take your victuals, and play your music in the aft parlour, and skeer away the Old One with the singing, as ye've skeered him already—that's what ye'll do afore Missie and the skipper—but by yourself, you won't have two eyes shut when you sleep, and you won't have two eyes open when you're above; and when you're wanted you won't be an hour getting yourself nor Mr. Rhoderick under weigh—and that's the end of it, for there's goes the bell."

The watch changed as he spoke, and I went below to the bathroom; thence, not thinking much of Dan's terror, nor of the men's petty grumbling, I joined the others at breakfast. We were now well towards the end of the journey, and I itched to set foot in America. The new safety in the presence of the warships had given us light hearts; and that fifth day we passed in great games of deck-quoits and cricket, with a soft ball which the bo'sun made for us out of tow and linen. The men worked cheerfully enough, giving the lie direct to Dan; and when Mary played to us after dinner at night I began to think that, all said and done, we should touch shore with no further happening; and that then I could make all use of the man Paolo and his knavery. So I went to bed at ten o'clock, and for an hour or two I slept with the deep forgetfulness which is the reward of a weary man.

At what hour Dan awoke me I cannot tell you. He shook me twice in the effort, he said, and when I would have turned up the electric light, he seized my hand roughly, muttering in a great whisper, "Hold steady." I knew then that mischief was afloat, and asked him what to do.

"Crawl above," he said, "and lie low a-deck;" and he went up the companion ladder when I got my flannels and rubber-shod shoes upon me. But at the topmost step he stood awhile, and then he fell flat on his hands, and backed again down the stairway, so that he came almost on top of me; but I saw what prompted his action, for, as he moved, there was a shadow thrown from the deck light down to where we lay; and then a man stepped upon the stair and descended slowly, his feet naked, but in his hand an iron bar; for he had no other weapon. At the sight of him, we had backed to the foot of the stairway; and, as the man crept down, we lay still, so that you could hear every quiver of the glass upon the table of the saloon; and we watched the fellow drop step by step until he was quite close to us in the dark, and his breath was hot upon us. Swiftly then and silently he entered the place; and, going to my cabin door, he slipped a wedge under it, serving the other doors around the big cabin in the same way. The success seemed to please him; he chuckled softly, and came again to the ladder, where with a quick motion, Dan brought his pistol-butt (for I had armed him) full upon the fellow's forehead, and he went down like a dead thing at the foot of the swinging table.

There we left him, after we had bound his hands with my scarf; and with a hurried knock got Roderick from his berth. He, in turn, aroused his sister, and in five minutes we all stood in the big saloon and discussed our plan.

Dan's whispered tale was this. The watch was Paolo's who had persuaded four stokers and six of the forward hands to his opinion. These men, the dupes of the second officer, had determined on this much—that the voyage to New York should be stopped abruptly, come what might, and that our intent should go for nothing.

We, being locked in our cabins, were to have no voice in the affair; or, if waked, then we should be knocked on the head, and so quieted to reason.

It was a desperate endeavour, wrought of fear; but at that moment the true hands of the fo'castle were battered down, and Dan, who had seen the thing coming, escaped only by his foresight. That night he had felt danger, and had wrapped himself up in a tarpaulin, and lain concealed on deck.

As it was, Paolo stood at the door of the skipper's room; there were three men guarding the fo'castle, and five at the foot of the hurricane deck. One man we had settled with; but we were three, and eight men stood between us and the true hands.

Roderick was the first to get his wits, and plan a course.

"We must act now," he said, "before they miss their men. 'They've stopped the engines, and we shall drop behind the others. There's only one chance, and that is to surprise them. Let's rush it, and take the odds.'"

"You can't rush it," I replied; "they're looking for that; and if one now went forward they would shoot him down straight—and what's to follow? They come aft, and how can we hold them? But we must get the skipper awake, or they'll knock him on the head while he sleeps."

Mary had listened, shivering with the night cold; but she had a word to add, and its wisdom was no matter for dispute.

"If I went," she said, "what could they do to me?"

We were all silent.

"I'm going now," she said; "while I'm talking to them they won't be looking for you."

"Certainly, we could follow up," I added, "and might get them down if you held them in talk; but don't you fear?"

She laughed, and gave answer by running up the companion-way, and standing at the top; while we cocked our pistols, and crept after her. Then we lay flat to the deck, as she ran noiselessly amidships, and into the very centre of the five men. To our astonishment, they gave a great howl of terror at the sight of her—for it lay so dark that she seemed but a thing of shadow hovering upon the ship—and bolted headlong forward; while we rushed in a body to the hurricane deck, and faced Paolo. He turned very white, and would have opened his lips; but Dan served him as the other; and hit him with his pistol, so that he rolled senseless off the narrow bridge, and we heard the thud of his head against the iron of the engine-room hatch. He had scarce fallen when Mary, with the laugh still upon her lips, reeled at the sight of him, and fell fainting in my arms. I knocked at the skipper's door, but he was already on his feet, and passed me to the bridge while I laid the swooning girl on the sofa in the chart-room.

The skipper got the whole situation at the first look, and acted in his usual silence. He re-entered his own cabin, and came to us again with a couple of rifles, which he loaded. We were now all crouching together by the wheel amidships, for Mary had recovered, and insisted that I should leave her, and we waited for the heavy black clouds to lift off the moon; but the fore-deck lay dark ahead of us; and we could not tell whether the men who had fled had gone below, or were crouching behind the galley, and the skylights of the fore-cabins. Nor could we hear any sound of them, although the skipper hailed them twice. He was for going forward at once; but we held back until the light came, and then by the full moon we saw dark shadows across the hatch. The men were behind the galley, as we thought—the eight of them.

The skipper hailed them again.

"You, Karl, Williams—are you coming out now, for me to flog you; or will you swing at New York?"

I could see their whole performance in shadow, as they heard the hail. One of them cocked a pistol, and the rest huddled more closely together.

"Very well," continued the skipper, ironically deliberate. "You've got a couple of planks between you and eternity. I'm going to fire through that galley."

He raised his rifle at the word, and let go straight at the corner of the light wood erection. A dull groan followed, and by the shadow on the deck I saw one man fall forward amongst the others, who held him up with their shoulders; but his blood ran in a thick stream out to the top of the hatchway, and then ran back as the ship heaved to the seas.

For the fifth time the skipper hailed them.

"There's one down amongst you," he said; "but that's the beginning of it; I'm going to blow that shanty to hell, and you with it."

He raised his rifle, but as he did so one of them answered for the first time with his revolver, and the bullet sang above our heads. The skipper's shot was quick in reply; and the wood of the shanty flew in splinters as the bullet shivered it. A second man sprang to his feet with a shout, and then fell across the deck, lying full to be seen in the moonlight.

"That's two of you," continued the skipper, as calm as ever he was in Portsmouth harbour; "we'll make it three for luck." But at the suggestion they all made a run forward, and lay flat right out by the cable. There we could hear them blubbering like children.

The skipper was of a mind to end the thing there and then. He sprang down the ladder to the deck, and we followed him. They fired three shots as we rushed on them; but the butt-ends of the two muskets did the rest. Three of them went down straight as felled poplars. The others fell upon their knees and implored mercy; and they got it, but not until the skipper, who now seemed roused to all the fury of great anger, set to kicking them lustily, and with no discrimination—for they all had their full share of it.

We had the other hands up by this, and, despite the tragedy and horror of the thing, a smile came to me as the true men set to binding the others at the skipper's order; for Piping Jack and Planks, and the whole ten of them, fell into such a train of swearing as would have done your heart good to hear. They got them below at the first break of dawn, and the dead they covered; while Paolo, who lay groaning, we carried to a cabin in the saloon, and did for his broken head that which our elementary knowledge of surgery permitted us.

As the day brought light upon the rising sea, I looked to the far horizon, but the rolling crests of an empty waste met my gaze. Again we were alone. The night's work had lost us the welcome company.

CHAPTER XL

THE SHIP IN THE BLACK CLOAK.

THE day that broke was glorious enough for Nature's making, but sad upon our ship, in that the folly of eight poor fellows should have cost the lives of two, with three more lying near to death in the fore-castle. The sea had risen a good deal when we got under steam again, and clouds scudded over the sun; but we set stay-sails and jibs, and made a fine pace towards the shores of America. It was near noon when we had buried the two stokers shot by the skipper, and more on in the afternoon before the decks were made straight, and the traces of the scuffle quite obliterated.

But Paolo lay all day in a delirium, and Mary went in and out, bearing a gentle hand to the wounded, who alternately cried with the pain of it, and begged grace for their insanity. The second officer's case was worse than theirs, and I thought at noon that the total of the dead would have been three; for he raved incessantly, crying "Ice, Ice!" almost with every breath, while we had all difficulty possible to hold him in his bunk. His words I could not get the meaning of; but I had them later, and in circumstances I had never looked for.

After the hour of lunch the skipper called Roderick and me into his cabin, and there he discussed the position with us.

"One thing is clear," he said; "you've brought me on more than a pleasure trip, and, while I don't complain, it will be necessary at New York for me to know something more—or, maybe to leave this ship. Last night's work must be made plain, of course; and this second officer of yours must stand to his trial. The men I would willingly let go, for they're no more than lubberly fools whose heads have been turned. But one thing I now make bold to claim—I take this yacht straight from here to Sandy Hook; and we poke our noses into no business on the way."

"Of course," said Roderick somewhat sarcastically, "you've every right to do what you like with my ship; but I seem to remember having engaged you to obey my orders."

"Fair orders and plain sailing," replied Captain York, bringing his fist down on the table with emphasis; "not running after war-ships that could blow us out of the water without thinking of it. Fair orders I took, and fair orders I'll obey."

"That's quite right, Roderick," I said; "there's no reason now why we shouldn't go straight on—if we don't meet with anyone to ask questions on the way; of that I'm not so sure, though."

"Nor I," said the skipper meaningly, and waiting for me to add more; but I did not mean to gratify him, and we all went out on deck again after we had agreed to let him have his will. We found the first officer on the bridge, looking away to the south-east, where the black hull of a steamer was now showing full. I do not know that the distant sight of a ship was anything to cause remark, but as I looked at her, I noticed that she steamed at a fearful speed, and she showed no smoke from her funnels.

"Skipper," I said, "will you look at that hull? Isn't the boat making uncommon headway?"

He took a very long gaze, and then he spoke—

"You're right. She's going more than twenty knots."

"And straight towards us!"

"As you say."

"Is there anything remarkable about that?"

He took another sight of her, and when he turned to me again he had no colour in his face.

"I've seen that ship before," he said.

"Where?" asked Roderick laconically.

"Five days ago, when she fired a shell into the *Ocean King*."

"In that case," said I, "there isn't much doubt about her intentions: she's chasing us!"

"That may or may not be," he replied, as he raised his glass again, "but she's the same ship, I'll wager my life. Look at the rake of her—and the lubbers, they've left some of their bright metal showing amidships!"

He indicated the deck-house by the bridge, where my glass showed me a shining spot in the cloak of black, for the sun fell upon the place, and reflected from it as from a mirror of gold. There was no longer any doubt: we were pursued by the nameless ship, and, if no help fell to us, I shuddered to think what the end might be.

"What are you going to do, skipper?" asked Roderick, as gloom fell upon the three of us; and we stood together, each man afraid to tell the others all he thought.

"What am I going to do?" said he. "I'm going to see the boats cleared, and all hands in the stoke-hole that have the right there;" and then he sang out, "Stand by!" and the men swarmed up from below, and heard the order to clear the boats. They obeyed unquestioningly; but I doubt not that they were no less uneasy than we were; and, as these things cannot be concealed, the whisper was soon amongst them that the danger lay in the black steamer, which had been five days ago the ship of gold. Yet they went to the work with a right-good will; and presently, when a canopy of our own smoke lay over us, and the yacht bounded forward under the generosity of the stoking, they set up a great cheer spontaneously, and were ready for anything. Yet I, myself, could not share their honest bravado. The black ship which had been but a mark on the horizon now showed her lines fully; there could be no two opinions of her speed, or of the way in which she gained upon us. Indeed, one could not look upon her advance without envy of her form, or of the terrifying manner in which she cut the seas. Churning the foam until it mounted its banks on each side of her great ram, she rode the Atlantic like a beautiful yacht, with no vapour of smoke to float above her; and not so much as a sign that any engines forced her onward with a velocity unknown, I believe, in the whole history of navigation. And so she came straight in our wake, and I knew that we should have little breathing time before we should hear the barking of her guns.

The skipper did not like to see my idleness or this display of inactive indifference.

"Don't you think you might help?" he asked.

"Help—what help can I give?—you don't suppose we can outsteam them, do you?"

"That's a child's question; they'll run us to a stand in four hours—any man with one eye should see that; but are you going down like a sheep, or will you give them a touch of your claws? I will, so help me Heaven, if there's not another hand breathing!"

"The skipper's right, by Jove!" said Roderick; "if it's coming to close quarters, I'll mark one man anyway," and with that he tumbled down the ladder, and into his cabin. I followed him, and got all the arms I could lay hands on, a couple of revolvers and a long duck-gun amongst the number. There were two rifles—the two we had used in the trouble with the men—in the chart-room, and these we brought on deck, with all the other pistols we had amongst us. We made a distribution of them amongst the old hands, giving Dan the duck-gun, which pleased him mightily.

"I generally shoots 'em sittin'," he said, "but I'll go for to make a bag, and willin'. You're keepin' the Missie out of it, sir?"

"Of course; she's looking after the sick hands downstairs. You go forward, Dan, and wait for the word, then blaze away your hardest."

"Ay, ay," replied he; and I took myself off to see after the others, whom we posted in the stern to keep a closer look-out; while Roderick, the first officer, and myself went above to the bridge.

The men now fell to work in right good earnest. They had all the grit of the old sea-dogs in them—how, I know not, except in this, that their lives had been given to the one mistress. The thought of a brush-up put dash and daring into them; they had the boats cleared, the water-barrels filled, and the life-belts free, with an activity that was remarkable. Then they stood to watch the oncoming of the nameless ship; and when we hoisted our ensign, they burst again into that hoarse roar of applause which rolled across the water-waste, and must have sounded as a vaunting mockery to the men behind the walls of metal. But they answered us in turn, running up an ensign, and a cry came from all of us as we saw its colour, for it was the blue saltire on a white ground.

"Russian, or I'm blind," said the skipper, and I looked twice and knew that his sight was safe to him; for the nameless ship, which five days ago showed her heels under a Chilean mask, now made straight towards us in Russian guise.

"Are you sure she's the same ship?" asked Roderick, when his amazement let him speak.

"Am I sure that my voice comes out of my throat?" said the old fellow testily. "Did you ever see but one hull shaped like that? And now she signals."

So rapidly had she drawn towards us that she was, indeed, then within gun-shot of us. After the first enthusiasm the men had stood, held under the spell of her amazing approach, and no soul had spoken. Even with their plain reckoning and hazy notion of it all, they seemed conscious of the peril; but not as I was conscious of it, for in my own heart I believed that no man amongst us would see to-morrow. There we stood alone, with no prospect but to face the men who openly declared war against us. I turned my eyes away to the crimson arch which marked the sun's decline; I looked again to the east, whence black harbingers of night hung low upon the darkened sea; I searched the horizon in every quarter, but it lay barren of ships, and soon the last light would leave us, and with the ebb of day there was no security against an enemy whose intentions were no longer disguised. I say no longer disguised—but of this the skipper made me cognisant. He pointed to the mast on the nameless ship, where the Russian ensign had hung ten minutes before. It was there no longer; the black flag took its place.

"Pirates, by the very devil!" said the skipper; and then he whistled long and loud and shrilly as a man who has solved a sum.

"Gentlemen," he added very slowly, "I said I would resign this ship at New York: with your permission I will withdraw that. I will sail with you wherever you go."

He shook our hands heartily, as though the discovery of our purpose had unclouded his mind. But we had no time for fuller understanding, for at that moment the air itself seemed torn apart by a great concussion, and a shell burst in the water no more than fifty yards ahead of us. When the knowledge that we were not hit was sure on the men's part, they bellowed lustily; and old Dan fired his gun into the air with a great shout. Yet we knew that all this was the cheapest bravado; and when the skipper touched the bell to stop our engines, I was sure that he was wise.

"That's the end of it, then," I said. "Well, it's pretty ignominious, isn't it, to be shot down like fools on our own quarter-deck?"

"Wait awhile," he answered, looking anxiously behind him, where a mist gathered on the sea; "let 'em lower a boat, the lubbers!"

By this time the great vessel rode still some quarter of a mile away from us; but the glass showed me the men upon her decks, and conspicuous amongst them I saw the form of Captain Black standing by the steam steering gear. Others below were moving at the davits, so that in a small space a launch was riding in a still sea, and was making for us. I watched her with nerves strained and lips dry; she seemed to me the message boat from Death itself.

"Stand steady, and wait for me!" suddenly yelled the skipper, his fingers moving nervously, and his look continually turning to the banks of mist behind us. "When I sing 'Fire!' pick your men!"

The boat was so near that you could see the faces in it; and three of the five I recognised, for I had seen them in the room of the Rue Joubert. The others were not known to me, but had rascally countenances; and one of them was a Chinaman's. The man who was in command was the fellow "Roaring John"; and when he was within hail he stood and bawled—

"What ship?"

"My ship!" roared back the skipper, again looking at the mist-clouds, and my heart gave a bound when I read his purpose: we were drifting into them.

"And who may you be?" bawled the fellow again, growing more insolent with every advance.

"I'm one that'll give you the best hiding you ever had, if you'll step up here a minute!" yelled the skipper, as cool as a man in Hyde Park.

"Oh, I guess," said the man; "you're aarnation fine talker, ain't you? But you'll talk less when I come aboard you, oh, I reckon!"

They came a couple of oar's lengths nearer, when Captain York made his reply. There was a fine roll of confidence in his voice; and he almost laughed when he cried—

"You're coming aboard, are you? And which of you shall I have the pleasure of kicking first?"

The hulking ruffian roared with pleasant laughter at the sally.

"Oh, you're a funny cuss, ain't you, and pretty with your jaw, by thunder! But it's me that you'll have the pleasure of speaking to, and right quick, my mate, oh, you bet!"

"In that case," said the skipper, with his calmness well at zero; "in that case— you, Dan! introduce yourself to the gentleman."

Dan's reply was instantaneous. He leant well over the bulwark, and his cheery old face beamed as he bellowed—

"Ahoy, you there that it's me pleasure to be runnin' against so far from me old country. Will you have it hot, or will you have it the other way for a parcel of cold-livered lubbers? By the Old 'Un, how's that for salt 'oss!"

He had up with his shot gun, and the long ruffian, who had reached forward with his boat-hook, got the dose full in his face as it seemed to me. At the same moment the skipper called "Fire!" and the heavy crack of the rifles and the sharp report of the pistols rang out together. The very launch itself seemed to reel under the volley; but the Chinaman gave a great shout, and jumped into the sea with the agony of his wound; while two of the others were stretched out in death as they sat.

"Full steam ahead!" roared Captain York, as the nameless ship replied with a shell that grazed our chart-room. "Full speed ahead!" Then, shaking his fist to the war-ship, he almost screamed—"Bested for a parcel of cut-throats, by the Powers!"

There was no doubt about it at all. The moment the yacht answered to the screw the fog rolled round us like a sheet, in thick wet clouds, steaming damp on the decks; and twenty yards ahead or astern of us you could not see the long waves themselves. But the sensations of that five minutes I shall never forget. Shot after shot hissed and splashed ahead of us, behind us; now dull, heavy, yet penetrating, and we knew that the ship lay close on our track; then farther off and deadened, and we hoped that she had lost us. Again dreadfully close, so that a shell struck the chart-room full, and crushed it into splinters not bigger than your finger, then dying away to leave the stillness of the mist behind it. An awful chase, enduring many minutes; a chase when I went hot and cold, now filled with hope, then seeming to stand on the very brink of death. But at last the firing ceased. We left our course, steaming for some hours due south across the very track of the nameless ship; and we went headlong into the fog, the men standing yet at their posts, no soul giving a thought to the lesser danger that was begotten of our speed; every one of us held in that strange after-tension which follows upon calamity.

When I left the bridge it was midnight. I was soaked to the skin and nigh frozen, and the water ran even from my hair; but a hot hand was put into mine as I entered the cabin, and then a thousand questions rained upon me.

"I'll tell you by-and-by, Mary. Were you very much afraid?"

She tossed her head and seemed to think.

"I was a bit afraid, Mark—a—little bit!"

"And what did you do all the time?"

"I—oh, I nursed Paolo—he's dying."

The man truly lay almost at death's door; but his delirium had passed; and he slept, muttering in his dream; "I can't go to the City—Black; you know it—let me get aboard. Hands off! I told you the job was risky;" and he tossed and turned and fell into troubled slumber. And I could not help a thought of sorrow, for I feared that he would hang if ever we set foot ashore.

I returned to the saloon sadly, though all was now brightness there. We served out grog liberally for the forward hands, and broke champagne amongst us.

"Gentleman," said the skipper, giving us the toast, "you owe your lives to the Banks; and, please God, I'll see you all in New York before three days."

And he kept his word; for we sighted Sandy Hook, and harm had come to no man that fought the unequal fight.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DRINKING HOLE IN THE BOWERY.

THE beauty of the entrance to the bay of New York, the amazing medley of shipping activity and glorious scenery, have often been described. Even to one who comes upon the capital of the New World, having seen many cities and many men, there is a charm in the sweeping woods and the distant heights, in the group of islets, and the massive buildings, that is hardly rivalled by the fascinations of any other harbour, that of San Francisco and the Golden Gates alone excepted. If you grant that the mere material of man's making is all very new, its power and dignity is no less impressive. Nor in any other city of the world that I know does the grandeur of the natural environment force itself so close to the very gates, as in this bay which Hudson claimed, and a Dutch colony took possession of so long ago as 1614.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when we brought the *Celsis* through the Narrows between Staten and Long Islands, and passed Forts Wandsworth and Hamilton. Then the greater harbour before the city itself rolled out upon our view; and as we steamed slowly into it the Customs took possession of us, and made their search. It was a short business, for we satisfied them that Paolo suffered from no malignant disease, although one small and singularly objectionable fellow seemed suspicious of everything aboard us. I do not wonder that he made the men angry, or that Dan had a word with him.

"Look here, sir," he whispered, making pretence to great honesty; "I won't go for to deceive you—p'raps that dog's stuffed wi' di'monds."

"Do you reckon I'm a fool?" asked the man.

"Well," said old Dan, "I never was good at calcerlations; but you search that dog, and p'r'haps you'll find somethin'."

The man seemed to think a moment; but Dan looked so very solemn, and Belle came sniffing up at the officer's legs; so he passed his hand over her back, and lost some of his leg in return.

"Didn't I tell you," said Dan, "as you'd get something if you searched that dog?—well, don't you go for to doubt me word next time we're meetin'. Good-day to yer honour. Is there any other animal as I could oblige you with?"

The officer went off, the men howling with laughter; and a short while after we had made fast at the landing-stage, and were ready to go ashore.

Paolo still lay very sick in his cabin, and we determined in common charity to take no action until he had his health again; but we set the men to keep a watch about the place, and for ourselves went off to dine at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. There, before a sumptuous dinner, and with all the novelty of the new scene, we nigh forgot

all that happened since the previous month ; when, without thought of adventure or of future, we had gone to Paris with the airless purpose of the idle traveller. And, indeed, I did my best to encourage this spirit of forgetfulness, since through all the new enjoyment I could not but feel that danger surrounded us on every hand, and that I was but just embarked on that great mission I had undertaken.

In this mood, when dinner was done, I suggested that Roderick should take Mary through the city awhile, and that I should get back to the *Celsis*, there to secure what papers were left for me, and to arrange, after thought, what my next step in the following of Captain Black should be. The skipper had friends to see in New York, and agreed that he would follow me to the yacht in a couple of hours, and that he would meet the others in the hotel after they had come from their excursion. This plan fell in with my own, and I said "Good-bye" cheerfully enough to the three men as I buttoned up my coat ; and sent for a coach. If I had known then that the next time I should meet them would be after weeks of danger and of peril, of sojourn in strange places, and of life amongst terrible men !

I was driven to the wharf very quickly, and got aboard the yacht with no trouble. There was a man keeping watch upon her decks ; and Dan had been in the sick man's cabin taking drink to him. He told me that he was more easy, and spoke with the full use of his senses ; and that he had fallen off into a comfortable sleep "since an hour." I was glad at the news, and went to my own cabin, getting my papers, my revolver, and other things that I might have need of ashore.

This work occupied me forty minutes or more ; but as I was ready to go back to the others I looked into Paolo's cabin, and, somewhat to my surprise, I saw that he was dressed, and seemingly about to quit the yacht. This discovery set me aglow with expectation. If the man were going ashore, whither could he go except to his associates, to those who were connected with Black and his crew ? Was not that the very clue I had been hoping to get since I knew that we had a spy aboard us ? Otherwise, I might wait a year and hear no more of the man or of his work except such tidings as should come from the sea. Indeed, my mind was made up in a moment : I would follow Paolo, at any risk, even of my life.

This thought sent me forward again into the fo'castle, where Dan was.

"Hist, Dan !" said I, "give me a man's rig-out—a jersey and some breeches and a cap—quick," and, while the old fellow stared and whistled softly, I helped to ransack his box ; and in a trice I had dressed myself, putting my pistols, my papers, and my money in my new clothes ; but leaving everything else in a heap on the floor.

"Dan," I said, "that Italian is going ashore, and I'm going to follow him. No, you mustn't come, or the thing will be spoilt. Tell the forward look-out to see nothing if the fellow passes, and get my rubber shoes from my trunk."

Dan scratched his head again, and must have thought that I was qualifying in lunacy ; but he got the shoes, and not a moment too soon, for, as I came on deck, I saw a shadow on the gangway. The man was leaving the yacht at that moment, and I followed him, drawing my cap right over my eyes, and lurking behind every inch of cover.

Once out into the city, and having turned two or three times to satisfy himself that he had no one after him, Paolo struck for Broadway ; thence with staggering gait, the result of his weakness, he made straight for the City Hall, at which point he turned and so got into Chatham Street and the Bowery. At last, after a long walk, and when the man himself was almost failing from the exertion of it, he stopped before an open door in the dirtiest of the streets through which we had come, and disappeared instantly. I came up to the door almost as soon as he had passed through ; and found myself before a steep flight of steps, at the bottom of which through a glass partition I could see men smoking and drinking, and hear them bawling uncouth songs.

It was a fearful hole, peopled by fearful men ; all nations and all sorts of villains were represented there : low Englishmen, Frenchmen, Russians, even niggers and Chinnamen ; yet into that hole must I go if I would follow Paolo to the end.

You may forgive me if I hesitated a moment ; waited to balance up the odds upon my recognition. I might have decided even then that the risk was too great, the certainty of discovery too palpable ; but at that moment a party of six hulking seamen descended the steps before me, and, taking advantage of the cover of their shoulders, I pulled my cap right over my face and passed through the swinging door with them into the most dangerous-looking place I have ever set foot in.

The room was long and narrow ; banked its whole length by benches that had once been covered with red velvet, but now showed torn patches and the protruding wool of the stuffing. Mirrors were raised from the dado of the ragged seats to the frieze of the smoke-blackened ceiling ; but they were for the most part cracked, and some had lost much of their glass. The accommodation for drinkers consisted of marble-topped tables, old and worn and stained with the dirt which was characteristic everywhere of the foul den ; but there was nothing but boards beneath one's feet ; and the wretched bar at the uppermost end of the chamber was no more than a plain deal bin with a high stool behind it for the serving man ; he being a great negro, grotesquely attired as a man of fashion. Indeed, had not the whole place been so threatening, I should have paused to laugh at this dusky scoundrel, whose white hat sat jauntily on the side of his woolly head, and whose well-cut black coat was ornamented with a great bunch of white flowers. But there was evil in this man's face, and in the faces of the others who sat close-packed on the faded couches ; and when I had paused for a moment to take reckoning of the room, I passed quickly to a bench near the door, and there sat wedged against a fair-haired seaman, whose look stamped him to be a Russian.

The scene was very new to me. I had heard of these drinking dens in that low quarter of New York called the Bowery ; but my American friends had cautioned me often to have no truck with them should I visit their city. They spoke of the poor regard for life which prevailed there ; of murders committed with an impunity which was as astounding as it was impossible for the police to suppress ; of mysterious disappearances, mysterious alone in the lack of knowledge as to the victim's end ; and they conjured me, if I would see such things, at least to go under the escort of the police. All this I had paid scant attention to at the time ; but the reality was before me with its grim terror. The room was filled with the scum of sea-going humanity ; foul smoke from foul pipes floated in choking clouds to the dirt-begrimed ceiling ; great brown pots of strong drink were emptied as though their contents had been milk ; horrid blasphemies were uttered as choice dishes of speech ; ribald songs rose in giant discord as the spirit moved the singers. Now and again, betwixt the shouting and the singing, a young girl, whose presence in such a company turned my heart sick, played upon a harp, while to serve the crew with liquor there was a mahogany-faced hag whom the men addressed as "Mother Catch." An old crone, bent and doubled like a bow, yet vigorous in her work, and shuffling with quick steps as she laid down the jugs, or took the uncouth orders so freely given to her, she seemed to have the eye of a hawk ; nor did I escape her glance, for I had not been seated before the marble table a moment when she shuffled up to me and stood glaring with her shining eyes, the very presentment of an old-time witch.

"Ha !" she said sharply, "ha ! a sailor boy in proper sailor clothes ; ho, little man, will ye wet yer throat for a pretty gentleman ?"

I did not like her mock courtesy, or the way in which she pronounced the word "gentleman" ; but I called for some beer to get her away, and when she brought it I remembered that I had no American money ; but I put an English florin before her and waited for the change. She hissed at the sight of it like a serpent about to strike.

"Ha ! Englishman ! and no money ; ho ! ho ! ye've got to find it, little man. Mother Catch likes you ; but she spits on it !"

She spoke the last words in such a loud voice that several men near me turned to look, and I feared to become the centre of a brawl. This would have

defeated everything, so I threw her a half-sovereign, and, feigning her own savage merriment, I said—

"Gold, little woman, English gold; spit on it for luck, little woman;" and I am bound to say that she did so, hobbling out of the room with the gold piece clenched in her nut-cracker jaws. Then I began to search with my eyes for Paolo; and, although the smoke was very thick, I saw him seated near the drinking-bar, a tumbler of brandy before him, his arms resting on the edge of the counter where the liquor was sold. I judged then that he had made no idle visit to this place; and in a quarter of an hour or so my surmise was proved. The glass door again swung open; three men entered through it, and I recognised the three of them in a moment. The first was the Irishman, "Four Eyes;" the second was the lantern-jawed Scotsman, who had been addressed in Paris as "Dick the Ranter;" the third was "Roaring John," into whose face Dan had emptied the contents of his duck-gun three days before. The ruffian had his mouth all bound in a bloody rag, so I hugged myself with the knowledge that he had been well hit; but he was in nowise depressed; and, although the gun had stopped his speech, he smacked Paolo on the back when he greeted him, and the others soon had their faces in the great brown jugs.

The sight of this company warned me to the work. I seemed to stand on the threshold of discovery. If only I could follow them hence to Black's house the whole aim of my journey would be fulfilled. And why not? I said; they will leave this place and go to their leader some time—if not now, at least to-morrow; and why should I lose touch with them? So far it was certain that my presence was undiscovered. The hag had suspicion of me, but not in their way; the men were too busy, I thought, talking of their own affairs to meddle even with their neighbours. Dan knew on what business I had left the ship, and would quieten Roderick's alarm for me. It was plain that fortune had turned kindly eyes on me.

I sat sipping the beer and smoking an old clay pipe, which I found in the breast-pocket of Dan's garment, doing these things to escape the remarks which the neglect of them would have occasioned, when there was some change in the bibulous entertainment as yet provided for us in the drink-hole. The hag raised her voice, wren to a croak with long scolding, and shrieked—

"Jack's a-going to dance for ye! Silence, pretty boys. Ho! ho! Jack the Fire-Devil, will ye listen then? And it's help me move the tables ye will, Master Dick, or ye're no minister that I took ye for. Back, my pretty gentlemen, lest I throw me vitriol on ye. Ha! but they love me like their own mother!"

She poked round with her stick at the scamen's feet, compelling them to fall back, and to make a ring for the dancer in the centre; and I saw with no satisfaction that the foul-mouthed villain who was called the "Ranter" came to give her his help to the work.

"Hoots, mither," he cried in his broadest Scots, "did ye mistake that I was a gentleman frae the Hielands o' bonnie Scotland? And I'll be verra glad to throttle some for a wee cup o' yer pretty poison. So ho! ye lubbers, it's an ower-fine discoors for a summer Sawbath that my boot will teach you. Mak' way, mak' way!"

Thus, with unctuous mockery and rough menace, the fellow followed the fury round the room, and forced the drunken crew to the wall. He came to my seat; but I buried my head in my hands, lest he should have carried the memory of my face from Paris; and he passed, having taken no notice of me, as I hoped. Soon he had made a great ring for the dancing; and one of the long mirrors opened, showing a door, whose existence I had not suspected; and a great negro with a flaming fire-pot entered the room. His entry brought applause; but he was a common quack of a performer, at the beginning, for he made pretence to eat the fire, and to bring it up again from his vitals. Then, to some wild music from a fiddler, he bound coils of the flaming stuff about his head; and, the lamps being lowered, he gave us a weird picture of a man dancing, all circled with flame; working himself up until I recalled pictures of the dervishes I had seen in the old quarter of Cairo. It was an extraordinary exhibition, and it pleased the men about so that they roared with

delight. I was watching it at last as intent as they were; but my attention was suddenly diverted by the sense that something under the marble table at which I was sitting was pulling at my leg. I looked down quickly, and saw a strange sight: it was the black face of the lad Splinters, who had been treated so brutally in Paris. He, crouching under the table, was making signs to me, earnest, meaning signs, so that without any betrayal I leant my head down as though upon my hands, and spoke to him—

"What is it, lad?" I asked in a whisper. "What do you want to say?"

"Don't stop here, sir!" he answered in a state of great agitation. "They know you, and are going to kill you!"

He said no more, crawling away at once; but he left me hot with fear. The mad dance was still going on, and the room was quite dark save for the glow cast by the spirit flames about the huge negro. It occurred to me at once that the darkness might save me if only I could reach the door unobserved; and I left my seat, and pushed amongst the men, passing nearer and nearer to the street, until at last I was at the very portal itself. Then I saw that a change had been made while I had been sitting. The doors of glass were wide open, but the way to the street without was no longer clear—an iron curtain had been drawn across the entrance, and a hundred men could not have forced it.

This was a terrible discovery. It seemed to me that the iron door had been closed for an especial purpose. I knew, however, that when the dance was over some of the audience would wish to go out, and so I waited by the curtain until the lamps were turned up, and the negro had disappeared. The men were then about to push their tables to the centre again, but the hag raised her voice and cried—

"As you are, my pretty gentleman; it's only the first part ye've been treated to. No, no; ye don't have the door drawn till ye've seen yer mother dance awhile. Good boys, all of ye, there's work to do; ho! ho! work to do, and Mother Catch will do it!"

At the words "work to do" a strange silence, which I did not then understand, fell on the company. Somehow, all the men immediately around me slunk away, and I found myself standing quite alone, with many staring at me. The four men whom most I feared had turned their backs, and were busy with their mugs; but the rest of the assembly had eyes only for the terrible woman and for myself. Presently the discordant music began again. The hag, who had been bent double, reared herself up with a "Ho!" after the fashion of a Scottish sword-dancer, and began to make a wretched shuffle with her feet. Then she moved with a hobble and a jig to the far end of the room; and she called out, beginning to come straight down to the door whereby I stood. I know not what presentiment forewarned me to beware as the creature drew near; but yet I felt the danger, and the throbbing of my heart. That I could hope for help amongst such a crew was out of the question. I had my revolver in my pocket, but had I shown it twenty barrels would have answered the folly. There was nothing to do but to face the screeching woman; and this I did as the unearthly music became louder, and the stillness of the men was speaking in its depth.

At the last, the old witch, who had danced for some moments at a distance of ten paces from the spot where I stood, became as one possessed. She made a few dreadful antics, uttered a piercing shriek, and hurled herself almost on me. In that instant I remember seeing the three men with Paolo suddenly rise to their feet, while the others in the room called out in their excitement. But the hag herself drew from her breast something that she had concealed there; and, as she stood within a yard of me, she brought it crash upon my head, and all my senses left me.

CHAPTER XIII.

ASTERN OF THE "LABRADOR."

COMPLETE unconsciousness is a blessing, I think, which comes rarely to us. Sleep, they say, is akin to death; yet I have often questioned if there be an absolute void of existence in sleep; and I am sure that in few cases where a blow robs us of sense does the brain cease to be active or to bring dreams in its working. I have been struck down unconscious twice in my life; but in each instance I have suffered much during the after-days from that trouble of mind which is akin to the feverish dream of an exhausted system. Horrid sights does the brain then bear to us; terrible situations; weird phantoms known to the opium-eater; wild struggles with unnatural enemies; wrestlings even for existence itself. All these I knew during the days that followed my rash visit to the drinking den. How long I lay, or where, I know not to this hour; but my dreams were very terrible, and there was a fever at my head which the ice of a great lake scarce could have cooled. Often I would know that I had consciousness, and yet I could not move hand or foot, so that the terror moved me to frenzies of agony, though my lips were sealed, and I felt myself passing to death. Or I would live again through the night when Martin Hall died, and from the boat where I watched the holocaust, I climbed to the shrouds of the cutter, and stood with my poor friend in the very shelter of the spreading flames. Or I struggled with Black, having hunted him to his own quarter-deck, and there with great force of men I sought to lay hands on him; but he escaped me with a mocking laugh, and when I looked again the deck was empty.

For short moments the delirium must have left me. Once I opened my eyes, and knew that the sun shone upon me, and that the breeze which cooled my forehead blew from the sea; but my fatigue was so great that I fell asleep in the next instant, and enjoyed pure rest during many hours. When I regained consciousness for the second time, it was because rain beat upon my face, a drizzling warm rain of late summer, and there was spray from a fresh sea. For some minutes I set myself to ask where I was; but I knew that I was bound at the left hand and at my feet, and, to my unutterable astonishment, when I raised my head, I saw that I lay in an open boat which was moving very slowly, but my feet were towards the stern of it, and, as my head lay below the level of the gunwale, I could see nothing of the power which moved the boat or of the scene about us.

It was a long time before my throbbing head let me put together a chain of thought to account for my position. The scene at the drinking den would not at first come back to me, think as I would; but when it did, the clue which was lacking came with it. There could be no doubt that I had walked into a trap, and that the hag who had struck me had been in the pay of Paolo and his crew. These men must have taken me as I lay, and so brought me to this boat; but what time had intervened, or where I was, I knew no better than the dead. Only this was sure, that I was in the hands of one of the greatest scoundrels living, and that, if his past were any precedent, my hours of life would be few.

I cannot tell you why it was, but strange to say, this reflection did not give me very great alarm at the moment. Perhaps I suffered too much from bodily weakness, and would have welcomed any release, even death; perhaps I was buoyed up with that eternal hope which bears its most generous blossom in the springtime of life. In either case, I put away the thought of danger, and set to the task of conning my position a little more closely. The boat in which I lay was painted white, and was of elegant build. She had all the fine lines of a yacht's jolly-boat; and when I raised my head I could see that her fittings had been put in only at great expense. She was not a large boat, but the centre seat had been removed from her to let me lie on a tarpaulin which covered her keel, and the stern seat had been used to bind my feet. A second tarpaulin, folded twice, had been propped under my head, but my left hand was bound close to the boat thwart, and there

was a rope doubled round my right forearm so that I could not raise myself an inch, though my right hand was free. The meaning of this apparent neglect I soon learnt. There was a flask on the edge of the tarpaulin which supported my head, and by it half a dozen rather fine captain's biscuits. I had a prodigious thirst on me, and I drank from the flask; but found it to contain weak brandy, and would willingly have exchanged thrice its contents for a long draught of pure water. But the biscuits I could not touch; and I began to be chilled with the rain which fell copiously, and with the sea which sent spray in fountains upon my body.

Up to this time, I had heard no sound of human voices, but the silence was broken at last by a shout, and the boat ceased to move.

"All hands, make sail!" cried someone, apparently above me; and after that I heard the "yo-heave" of the men hauling, as I judged, at a main-sail. The second order, "Sheets home!" proved to me that I was behind a sailing ship, perhaps a yacht which these men had secured, as they got *La France*—and burnt her. I shuddered at the second thought, and my head began to burn again despite the wet. Did they mean to leave me there until the end of it, when the cold and my wound should do their work? Had they forgotten me? Had they any reason for keeping me alive? My questions were in part answered by a sudden shout from the deck of the ship.

"Ho, Bill, is the young 'un gone?"

"No, my hearty, he's gone about!"

"Getting his spirits damped, I reckon."

"Some, you bet."

And then I heard a voice I knew, the voice of the Irishman, "Four-Eyes."

"Is it the boy ye're mindin', bodad?"

"Ay, sir, he's moved a point."

"The poor divil. Throw him a sheet, one av yer; it's meself that's not bringing the guvner a dead body when he wants a live one, be Saint Patrick!"

They tried to throw me a sheet as the man had ordered, but we had begun to move rapidly again, and I heard it fall in the water by my head. Though there was more hailing, the thud of the choppy sea against the boat forbade any more hearing, and the sheet never reached me. Yet the men had told me something with their words, and I pondered long on the remark of the Irishman, that the "guvner" wanted me alive. It explained much; and it put beyond doubt the reason why I had not been killed in the drinking den. It was quite clear that my life was safe from these men until they reached their chief; but where he was I had no notion, except he were on the nameless ship; and, if that were so, to the nameless ship I was going—that ship of horror and of mystery. Nor could I remember anything in what I knew of Captain Black to lead me to the hope that such a voyage was other than one to death, and perhaps to that which might be worse than death itself.

When this strange progression had lasted about an hour, the rain ceased and the sun shone again with renewed power, drying my clothes upon me and giving me prodigious thirst. I struggled to reach the flask, and in doing so I found that the ropes binding my right arm were tied with common hitches, such as any sailor could force; and my experience as a yachtsman let me get free of them with very little trouble. I did not sit up at once, for I feared to be seen from the decks; but I turned my head to look at the boat which towed me, and saw that she was a barque-rigged yacht after the American fashion; her name *Labrador* being conspicuous across her stern. My boat, which was no larger than I had thought, was towed by a double hawser; but no man watched me from the poop, and I lay down again reassured. The hope of escape was already in my head, for I judged that we could not be far out from New York, although no land was visible on the horizon. It occurred to me that if they would only let me be until night I could get my left hand and my feet free; and, as the hawser was passed through a ring at the bow, I needed but a knife to complete the business. But I had no knife, for a search in my pockets proved that I had been relieved of all my valuables and trifles; and I knew that another way must be found, and that ingenuity alone would help me. So I sat

thinking ; and all the long afternoon—I knew it was afternoon, as I saw the sun sinking in the horizon and heard the bells, moreover—I examined such devices as came to me, only to reject them and to seek for others.

Towards the second bell in the second “dog” there was a change in the monotony of the scene. I heard an order to heave the barque to, and presently I made haste to put the ropes back in their places and to await the happening. I felt all motion cease, and then someone hauling at the hawser, so that the jolly-boat was pulled against the side of the bigger ship ; and, looking up, I saw half-a-dozen of Black’s gang watching me from the quarter-deck. Then a ladder was put over the bulwark, and Four-Eyes himself cried out not in an unkindly tone—

“Gi-me the soop, bhoys, and let’s get it in him ; begorra, the divil ’ll have him afore the skipper if it’s no mate you’re givin’ him !”

He came down the ladder with a great can of steaming stuff ; and the sea having fallen away with the sun to a dead calm, he stepped off the ladder to the stern seat, and then bent over me. But I saw this only, that he had a knife in his belt ; and I made up my mind in a moment to get it from him.

“The young ‘un from Paris,” he cried, as he took a long look at me, “and near to axin’ for a priest, by the holy saints ; but I was tellin’ ye to stop where ye was, and it’s no thanks ye were giving me. Bedad, and a pretty place ye’re going to, sorr, at your own wish—the divil knows what’s the end av it—but sup a bit, for it’s fastin’ ye are by the luk av ye, and long gone at that !”

Kindly words he gave me ; and he held to the rope with one hand while he put the can of hot stuff to my lips with the other. I drank half of it with great gulps, feeling the warmth spread through my body to my very toes as the broth went down ; and a great hope consoled me, for I had his knife, having snatched it from him when first he stooped, and it lay in the tarpaulin beneath me. The good luck of the theft made me quick to empty the pot of gravy ; and when I had returned the can, Four-Eyes went over the side again, and the yacht moved onward lazily in the softest of breezes from the west. But my boat lay behind her again ; and I did not stir from my restful position until it was full dark ; though the going down of the sun had left a clear night and a zenith richly set with a shimmer of stars, which did not give any great promise to my thoughts of coming freedom.

When I deemed that I had waited long enough, and had assured myself that the later night would not be more auspicious for the attempt, I cut away the remaining ropes at my feet, and crouched unbound in the boat. There was good watch upon the ship, I knew, for I could hear the “All’s well !” as the bells were struck, and the passing of the orders from the poop to the fo’castle. This did not deter me ; and, being determined to stake all rather than face the terrors of the nameless ship, I crawled to the bow, and began to cut the strands of the hawser one by one. The rope was very thick and hard, and the knife which I had stolen was blunt, so that the work was prodigiously slow and difficult ; and when I had been at it for half an hour or more, I was interrupted in a way that sent my heart almost into my mouth. There was a man standing on the poop of the *Labrador*, and he seemed to be watching my occupation. I threw myself flat instantly, and listened to his hail.

“Ahoy, there, young ‘un, are you getting a chill ?” cried a bluff voice, which I did not recognise ; but presently the man Four-Eyes hailed also, and I heard him say—

“If it’s dead ye are, will ye be sending word up to us ?” and, seeing the mood, I bawled with all my strength—

“I’m all right ; but I’ll call out for some more of that soup of yours just now.”

They gave a great shout, and one of them said—

“You ken calcerlate ez you will be gettin’ it all nice en’ hot when you meet the old ‘un in the mornin’ ;” and the crew roared with laughter at the sally, and disappeared one by one from the poop. Then I whipped out my knife again, and with a few vigorous strokes I cut the rope clean through, and felt my boat go swirling away on the backwash. It was a moment of supreme excitement, and I lay quite flat, waiting to hear if I were missed ; but I heard no sound, and looking

round presently, I saw the yacht away a mile, and I knew that I was a free man.

The delight of the enterprise would have been intense if my unexpected success had not allowed me to forget one thing when I had made my hasty plans. *There were no oars in the boat.* The terrible truth came to me as I fixed the seat and prepared to put greater distance between the *Labrador* and myself. But one look round convinced me that the position was hopeless. With the exception of the tarpaulins, the seats, and the tiller, the boat was unfurnished. As I thought of these things, and remembered that I was some hundreds of miles from land, that I had a couple of biscuits for food, and half a flask of brandy and water for drink, I experienced a terror greater than any I have known; and so weak was I with sickness and so low with the disappointment of it, that I put my head between my hands and sobbed like a great child who had known a childish sorrow. Only when the tears had dried upon my face, and there was that after-sense of resignation which follows a nervous outbreak, did I upbraid myself for a weakling, and set to think out plans for my release. I had no compass, but, taking the north through the "pointers," I tried to make out the course in which I was drifting; yet this, I must confess, was a hopeless task. I thought that the boat was being carried by a steady current; yet whether the current set towards the land or away from it, I could not tell.

When a couple of hours had passed, and I could see the yacht no longer, I took a new consolation in the thought that I must, after all, be in the track of steamers bound out from, or to, New York; and in this hope I covered myself in the tarpaulins and lay down again to shield myself from the wind which blew with much sharpness as the night grew. I did not sleep, but lay half-dazed for an hour or more, and was roused only at a curious light which flashed above me in the sky. Its first aspect led me to the conclusion that I saw a reflection of the *Aurora*; but the second flash altered the opinion. The light was clearly focussed, being a volume of intensely bright, white rays which passed right above me with slow and guided motion, and then stopped altogether, almost fixed upon the jolly-boat. I knew then what it was, and I sat up to see the great beams of a man-of-war's search-light, showing an arc of the water almost as clear as by the sun's power. The vessel itself I could not make out; but I feared at once that fate had sent me straight to the nameless ship; and that the very misfortune I had thought to have undone was brought home to me. Yet I could not take one step to defend myself, and must perforce drift on, to what end I knew not.

The light shone in all its brightness for some five minutes; then it died away suddenly, and on the spot whence it had come I could just distinguish the dark hull of a steamer. To my vast consolation, she had two funnels and three masts, and I remembered that Black's boat had but one funnel and two masts, so that good fortune seemed to have come to me at last. Over-delighted with the discovery, I stood up at my risk in the jolly-boat and waved my arms wildly; when, as if in answer, the search-light flashed out again and bathed me in its refulgent beams. Some moments, long moments to me, passed in feverish conjecture; and then in the pathway of the light I saw in all distinctness the outline of a long-boat, fully manned, and she was coming straight to me. There could be no more doubt of it; I had passed through much suffering, but it was all child's play to the "might have been;" and in the reaction I laughed aloud like an hysterical woman, and blushed to remember those great tears which had rolled over my face not an hour gone. And all the time I never took my eyes from the boat; but feasted on it as a beggar-child feasts in imagination on the gauds of a groaning table. Its progress seemed slow, woefully slow; the men in it made me no manner of signal, never gave an answer to my erratic hand-waving; but, what was of more consequence, they came in a bee-line towards me, and the radiating light never moved once whilst they rowed. In the end, I myself broke the silence, shouting lustily to them, but getting no answer until I had repeated the call thrice. The fourth cry, loud and in something desperate, brought the response so eagerly awaited; but when I

recognised the voice of him who then hailed me I fell down again in my boat with a heart-stricken burst of sorrow, for the voice was the Irishman's, and Four-Eyes spoke—

"Avast hailing', young 'un," he cried; "we ain't goin' to part along o' your society no more, don't you be frettin'."

They dragged me into their boat, and taking my own in tow, they rowed rapidly to the distant steamer, on whose deck I stood presently; but not without profound fear, for I knew that at last I was a prisoner on the nameless ship.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CABIN IN SCARLET.

THERE was light from six lanterns, held by giant negroes, to greet me when I had mounted the ladder and was at last on the deck of the great ship; but none of the men spoke a word, nor could I see their faces. Of those who had brought me from the jolly-boat, I recognised two besides "Four-Eyes" as men whom I had seen in Paris, but the Irishman appeared to be the captain of them; and, in lack of other leader, he spoke when all were aboard, but it was in a monosyllable. "Aft!" he said, looking round to see if anyone else were near; and one of them silently touched me upon the shoulder, and I followed him along a narrow strip of iron deck, past a great turret which reared itself above me, and again by the covered forms of quick-firing guns. We descended a short ladder to a lower deck; and so to the companion way, and to a narrow passage in which were many doors. One of these he opened, and motioned me to enter, when the door was closed noiselessly behind me, and I found myself alone.

My first feeling was one of intense surprise. I had looked to enter a prison; but, if that were a prison, then were lack of liberty shorn of half its terrors. The cabin was not large, but one more artistic in effect was never built. Hung all round with poppy-coloured silk, the same material made curtains for the bunk—which seemed of unusual size, and furnished with sleep-bespeaking mattresses. It was employed also for the cushions and covering of the arm-chair and the couch, and to drape the dressing-glass and basin which were in the left-hand corner. It seemed, indeed, that the whole room was a harmony in scarlet, with a scarlet ceiling and scarlet hangings; but the luxury of it was unmistakable, and the feet sank above the ankles in the soft Indian rug, which was ornate with the quaint mosaic-like workings and penetrating colours of all Eastern tapestry. For light, there was an arc-lamp, veiled with gauze of the faintest yellow; and upon the table in the centre was a decanter of wine and a box of cigars. The room would have been perfect but for a horrid blot upon it—a blot which stared at me from the outer wall with bloodshot eyes and hideous visage. It was the picture of a man's head that had been severed from the body; and was repulsive enough to have been painted by Wiertz himself. The picture almost terrified me, but I thought, if no worse harm befall me what odds? and I sat down all wondering and dazed, and drew a cigar from the box upon the table. The wine, of which I drank nearly a tumblerful, put new courage of a

sort into me ; and so, troubled and amazed, I began to ask myself what the proceeding meant, or what the portent of it all could possibly be.

My conclusion was, when I thought the whole thing out, that the man Black could be showing me this marked consideration only for some motive of self-interest. It was evident that he had been aware of my intention to follow him from the moment when Roderick purchased our new steam-yacht. He had put one of his own men craftily upon the ship to watch us, and had made a bold attempt to deal with us in mid-Atlantic. Foiled there, he had taken advantage of my folly in entering such a place as the Bowery, and had given orders that I should be carried to his own ship—for I knew then that the strange craft he owned was capable of many disguises—and should be carried alive. Why alive, if not that he might learn all about me, or that a more dreadful fate than mere death should be mine ? I had seen the appalling end of poor Hall, the merciless severity with which his death had been compassed : why should I expect more gentle usage or other recompense ? If ever man had been trapped, I had been ; and, beneath all my placid self-restraint, I felt that my life was not worth an hour's—nay, perhaps ten minutes'—purchase. It was as if I had been taken clean out of the world with no man to extend me a helping hand. Roderick, truly, would move heaven and earth to reach me, but what could he hope for against such a crew ; or how should I expect to be alive when he brought his attempts to a head ? And I thought of him with deep feelings of friendship at that moment, and wondered what Mary would say. She will be serious, I argued, for the first time in her life, and they will know much anxiety. Yet that must be—in the floating tomb where I lay I could hope to send no word to the living world which I had left.

I had smoked one cigar in the 'cabin, listening to the tremendous throb of the ship's screws, and the swish of the sea as we cleaved it, when the electric light went out, and I was left in darkness. The sudden change gave me some alarm, and I cocked my revolver, being resolute to account for one man at least, if any attempt were made upon me ; but when I had sat quite still for some half-an-hour there was no noise of movement save on the deck above, and my own cabin remained as still as the grave. It appeared that I was to be left unmolested for that night at any rate ; and, being something of a philosopher, I waited for another hour or so, and finding that no one came near me, I undressed and lay down in one of the most seductive beds I have met with at sea. I did, indeed, take the precaution of putting my Colt under the pillow ; but I was so weary and fatigued with my sufferings in the open boat that I fell asleep at once, and must have slept for many hours.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRISON OF STEEL

I AWOKE in the day, but at what hour of it I know not. The red curtains opposite to my bunk were drawn back, admitting dull light from a port-hole through which I could look upon a tumbling sea, and a sky all girt with rain-clouds. But I had not been awake five seconds when I saw that my arm-chair was occupied by a man who did not look more than thirty years old, and was dressed with all the scrupulous neatness of a thorough-going yachtsman. He was wearing a peaked cloth cap with a gold eagle upon it, a short jacket of

blue serge, with ample trousers to match, and a neat pair of brown shoes; while his linen would have touched the heart even of the most hardened *blanchisseuse* of the city. He had a bright, open face, marred only by a peculiarly irritating movement of the eye, which told of a nervous disposition; and there was something refined and polished in his voice, which I heard almost at once.

"Good-morning to you," he said; "I hope you have slept well?"

"I have never slept better; it must be twelve o'clock, isn't it?"

"It's exactly half-past three, American time. I didn't wake you before, because sleep is the best medicine in your case. I'm a doctor, you know."

"Oh! you're the physician-in-ordinary to the crew, I suppose; you must see a good deal of practice."

He looked rather surprised at my meaning remark, and then said quite calmly, "Yes, I write a good many death certificates; who knows, I may even do that service for you?"

It was said half-mockingly, half-threateningly; but it brought home to me at once the situation in which I was; and I must have become serious, which he saw, and endeavoured to turn me to a lighter mood.

"You must be hungry," he continued; "I will ring for breakfast; and, if you would take a tub, your bathroom is here."

He opened the door in the passage, and led the way to a cabin furnished with marble and brass fittings, wherein was a full-sized bath and all the appurtenances for dressing. I took a bath, and found him waiting for me when I had finished. We returned to the scarlet room, and there spread upon the table was a meal worthy of Delmonico's. There was coffee served with thick cream; there were choice dishes of meat, game pies, new rolls, fruit, and the whole was finished with ices and bon-bons in the true American fashion. My new friend, the doctor, said nothing as I ate; but when the repast was removed he pushed the cigars to me, and, taking one himself, he began to talk at once.

"I regret," he said, "that I cannot supply you with a morning newspaper; but the latest journal that I can lend you is a copy of the *New York World* of Saturday last. There is a passage in it which may interest you."

The paper was folded and marked in a certain spot. I read it with blank amazement, for it was a full account of the nameless ship's attack upon the American cruiser and the *Ocean King*. The paper stated shortly that both ships had been impudently stopped in mid-Atlantic by a big war-vessel flying the Chilean flag; that the cruiser had been seriously damaged and had lost twenty of her men; while a shell had been fired into the fo'castle of the passenger ship and two of her men killed, with other such details as you know. The matter was the subject of a profound sensation, not only in America, but throughout the world. The Chilean Government had been approached at once, but had repudiated all knowledge of the mysterious ship. Meanwhile war-vessels from England, America, and from France had set out to scour the seas and bring such intelligence as they could. The whole account concluded with the rumour that a gentleman in New York had knowledge of the affair, and would at once be interviewed, with the result, it was hoped, of disclosing that which would be one of the sensations of the century.

When I had put the paper down, the doctor, who followed me with his eyes, said laughingly—

"You see that interview was unfortunately interrupted. You are the gentleman with the full particulars, for we know that your friend Stewart plays a very small part in the affair. Without your energy, I think I may say that he is little less than a fool."

"Hardly that, as you may yet discover," I said, seeing instantly which way safety lay; "he knows as much as I know."

"Which is not very much after all, is it?—but that we must have fuller knowledge of. I am here to ask you to write accurately for us a complete account of every step you have taken in this matter since you were fool enough

to follow Martin Hall, and poke your nose into business which did not concern you. As you know, Hall was punished in the Channel: you saw his end, as I hear from my comrade Paolo. We have spared you, and may yet spare you, if you do absolutely what we tell you."

"And otherwise?"

He smiled cruelly, and his eyes danced when he answered—

"Otherwise, you would give all you possessed if I would shoot you now as you sit; but don't let us look at it that way. You must see that your case is utterly hopeless; you will never look again on any civilised city, or see the face of a man you have known. For all purposes you are as dead as though twenty feet of earth covered you. If you would still have life, not altogether under unfavourable conditions, you have but to ask for pen, ink, and paper—and to make yourself one of us."

"That I will never do!"

"Oh, you say that now; but we shall give you some days to think of it. Let me advise you to be a man of common sense, and not to run your head against a stone wall. Believe me, we are a curious company; I don't suppose there is a man aboard us who has not some deaths to his account. I am wanted for a murder in Shropshire; but I am giving your people a little trouble. Ha! ha!"

This was said with such a fearful laugh that I shrunk back from the man, who restrained himself with an effort as he rose to go; but as he stood at the door, he said—

"We are now bound on a four-days' voyage. During these four days, you need fear nothing. We should have paid off our score in the Atlantic, and sent you and your fellows to join other intrusive friends of ours, if we had not wished to get this little account of yours. So don't disturb yourself unnecessarily until Captain Black puts the question to you. Then, if you are foolish, you had better feed your courage. I have seen stronger men than you who have cried out for death when we had but put our fingers on them; and we shall do you full honour—in fact, we shall treat you royally."

When he was gone, I thought that he had spoken with truth. To all my friends I was as dead as though twenty feet of earth lay on my body. What hope had I, shut in that grave of steel? What friend could hear me, battened in that prison on the sea? Should I tell the men frankly all I knew, and crave their mercy, or should I seek hope in the pretence that Roderick had information which might yet be fatal to them? I thought the position out, and this was the sum of it. These men had a home somewhere. If I had known where that home was, and had communicated the knowledge to Roderick, then the Governments of Europe could bring the ruffian crew to book with little difficulty. That, without a doubt, was the question Black would put to me. He would wish to know all I knew; but, if I refused to tell him, he would proceed to extremes, and I shuddered when I remembered what his extremes had been in the case of Hall. The man undoubtedly had conceived a scheme daring beyond any known in the nineteenth century. The knowledge of his hiding-place was the key to his safety. If Roderick had it, then, indeed, I might have looked for life; but I knew that Hall had never discovered it, and what hope had Roderick where the greater skill had failed?

This consideration led me to one conclusion. I would pretend that I had some knowledge, and that my friends had it too. If that did not save my life, God alone could help me, and the home of Captain Black would be my grave. Nor did I know in any case that I had much expectation of life in such surroundings or in such company.

CHAPTER XVI.

6
NORTHWARD HO!

DURING some days I saw no more of the doctor, or of anyone about the ship save an old negro, who became my servant. He was not an unkindly-looking man, being of a great age, and somewhat feeble in his actions; but he never opened his lips when I questioned him, and gave a plain "Yes" or "No" to any demand. Those days would have been monotonous, had it not been for the ever-present sense of coming danger, of a future dark and threatening, likely to be fruitful in trial and in peril. Each morning at an early hour the age-worn black entered my cabin and told me that my bath was ready. When I was dressed, a breakfast, generous in quality and in quantity, was set upon my cabin table. At one o'clock luncheon of like excellence was served; and again at five o'clock and at eight, tea and dinner. Some thought evidently was given to my condition, for on the second morning I found clean linen with a neat suit of blue serge awaiting me in the bathroom, and when I had breakfasted, the black brought a parcel of books to me; I found amongst them, to my satisfaction, several light works by Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Max Adeler, as well as more solid literary food. The books saved me from much of that foreboding which I should have known wanting them, and after the first fears had passed I spent the hours in reading or looking through the port-hole over the deserted waste of a fretful sea. I had hoped to learn something of our destination from this diligent watching of the waves; but for the first forty hours, at any rate, I saw nothing—not so much as a small ship—though it felt much colder; and again on the third day the lower temperature was yet more marked, so that I welcomed fresh and warmer clothing which the negro brought me for my bed; and observed with satisfaction that there were means within the ship for heating the cabin during the day-time.

It must have been on the fourth day after my capture that the nameless ship, which hitherto had not been speeding at an abnormal pace, began to go very fast, the rush of water from the head of her rising frequently above my port, and permitting but rare views of the distant horizon. The greater speed was sustained during that day until the first dog-watch, when I was disturbed in my reading by the consciousness that the ship had stopped, and that there was much agitation on deck. I looked from my window and observed the cause of the confusion, for there, ahead of us a mile or more, was one of the largest icebergs I have ever seen. The mighty mass, from whose sides the water was rushing as in little cataracts, towered above the sea to a height of four or five hundred feet, rising up in three snow-white pinnacles which caught the crimson light of the sinking sun and gave it back in prismatic hues, all dazzling and beautiful. As a great island of ice, all rich in waving colour and superb majesty, the berg passed on, and the screw of the steamer was heard again. I watched intently, hoping to see other bergs, or, indeed, any ships that should tell me how far we had gone towards the North; but the night fell suddenly, and the negro served dinner, asking me if I had warmth enough? My curt answer seemed to astonish him; but the truth was that I was thinking of the man Paolo's words when sick upon my own ship. He had cried, "Ice, ice," more than once in his delirium; but none of us then had the meaning of his cry. Yet I had it, and with it a notion of the second secret of Captain Black. For surely he was running to hiding; and his hiding-place lay to the north, far above the course even of Canadian-bound vessels, as I knew by the number of days we had been steaming.

This new surmise on strange openings did not in any way combat the terror which visited me so often in that floating prison. Every day, indeed, seemed to take me farther from humanity, from friends, from the lands and the peoples of civilisation. Every day confirmed me in the thought that I was hopelessly in this man's grip, the victim of his mercy, or his rigour; that none would know of my end when that end should come; no man say "God help you!" when at last the fellow should

show his teeth. Such dire communings robbed me of my sleep at night ; led me to books whose pages passed blurred before me ; made me start at every rap upon the cabin door ; brought me to fear death even in the very food I ate. Yet during the week I was a prisoner on the ship no harm of any sort befell me. I was treated with the hospitality of a great mansion, served with all I asked, unmolested save for the doctor's threat.

And so the time passed, the weather growing colder day by day, the bergs more frequent about my windows ; until on the evening of the seventh day the ship stopped suddenly, and I heard the anchor let go. This was late in the watch, at the time when I was in the habit of going to bed ; but hearing great movement and business on the deck I sat still, waiting for what should come ; and after the lapse of an hour or more I found that we were moving very slowly again, and with but occasional movements of the screw. I opened my port, and could hear loud shoutings from above, and although there was no light of the moon, I could see enough to conclude that we were passing by a great wall of rock, and so into some harbour or basin.

The work of mooring the ship was not a long one when once we had come to a stand. When all was done the noise ceased, and no one coming to me I went to bed as usual. On the next morning I got up at daybreak, and looked eagerly from my spying place ; but I could discern only a blank cliff of rock, the ship being now moored against the very side of it. The negro came to me at the usual hour, but he brought a note with my breakfast ; and I read an invitation to dine with Captain Black at eight o'clock on that evening. You may be sure that I welcomed even such a prospect of change, for the monotony of the cabin prison had become nigh unbearable ; and when at a quarter to eight that evening the old man threw open the door and said, "The Master waits !" I went with him almost joyfully, even though the next step might have been to my open grave.

He led the way up the companion ladder, which was, in fact, a broad staircase, elaborately lit with the electric light ; and so brought me to the deck, where there was darkness save in one spot above the fore-turret. There a lantern threw a great volume of white light which spread out upon the sea, and showed me at once that we were in a cove of some breadth, surrounded by prodigiously high cliffs ; and the light being focussed right across the bay, disclosed a cleft in these rocks leading apparently to a further cove beyond. I had scarce time to get other than a rough idea of the whole situation, for a boat was waiting at the gangway, and the negro motioned to me to pass down the ladder and take my seat in the stern. The men gave way at once, keeping in the course of the search-light, and rowing straight to the cleft in the cliffs, through which they passed ; and so left the light and entered a narrower fjord, which was ravine-like in the steepness of its sides, and so dark, that one could see but a narrow vista of the sky through the overhanging summits of the giant rocks. This second cove opened after a while into a lake ; above whose shores, at a high spot in the side of the precipice on the left hand, I observed many twinkling lights, which seemed to come from windows far up the face of the cliff. These lights marked our destination, the men rowing straight to them ; and I found, when we came near the precipitous shore which bound the fjord, that there was a rough landing-stage, cut in the rock, and that an iron stairway led thence to the chambers which evidently existed above.

When we had come to shore, and had been received there by several men who held lanterns, and had the look of Lascars, the negro conducting me pointed to the iron stairway and told me to mount ; he following me to the summit, where there was a platform and an iron door. The door opened as we arrived before it, and there standing by it I found the young doctor, who greeted me very heartily and appeared to be altogether in a merry mood.

"Come in," he said, "they're waiting for you ; and this infernal cold gives men appetites. This way—but it isn't very dark, is it !"

We were in a broad passage lit by electric light—a passage cut in a crystal-like rock, whose surface had almost the lustre of a mirror. At intervals facing the cove

were incisions for windows, but these were now hung over with heavy curtains ; and there were cupboards and pegs against the rock wall on the opposite side to make the place serve the purposes of a hall. The passage led up to a second door—this one built of fine American walnut ; and we passed through it at once into a room where I was astounded to see indisputable evidence of civilisation and of refinement. The whole chamber was hung round with superb skins, the white fur of the Polar bear predominating ; but there were couches cushioned with deep brown seal ; and the same glossy skin was laid upon the floor in so many layers that the footfall was noiseless and pleasantly luxuriant. The furniture otherwise was both modern and artistic. A heavy buhl-work writing-table opposite the door was littered with maps, books, and journals ; there was a secretaire book-case, in Chippendale, by the side of the enormous fire-place, in which a great coal fire burned ; and above this was an ivory overmantel of exquisite work ; a grand piano, open and bearing music, was the chief ornament of the left-hand corner ; while another Chippendale cabinet, filled with a multitude of rare curiosities, completed an apartment which had many of the characteristics of a salon and not a few of a study.

But I had not eyes so much for the room as for the solitary occupant of it, who sat before the writing-table, but rose after I had entered. One glance assured me that I was face to face with Captain Black—the Captain Black I had seen at the drunken orgie in Paris ; but yet not the same, for all the bravado and rough speech which then fell from his lips was wanting ; and his “Come in !” given in answer to the young doctor’s knock, was spoken melodiously in a rich baritone voice that fell very pleasantly upon the ear. When he stepped forward and held out his hand to me, I had the mind almost to draw back from him, for I knew that the man had crime heavy upon him ; but a second thought convinced me of the folly of making a scene at such a moment ; so I took the great hard hand and looked him full in the face. He was not so tall as I was, but a man who appeared to possess colossal strength in his enormous arms and shoulders ; and one not ill-looking, though his black beard fell upon his waistcoat, and his jacket of seal was loose and ill-fitting. The strange thing about our meeting was this, however. When he had taken my hand, he held it for a minute or more, looking me straight in the face with an interest I could not understand ; and, indeed, he then forgot himself entirely, and continued to gaze upon me and to shake my hand until I thought he would never let it go.

When at last he recovered himself it was with a quick start.

“I am glad to see you,” said he ; “dinner waits us ;” and with that we passed into another chamber, hung with skins as the first was, but containing a dining-table laid for four persons in a very elegant manner, with cut glass, and silver epergnes laden with luscious-looking fruit, and the best of linen. The light came from electric lamps in the ceiling, and from other lamps cunningly placed in a great block of ice, which formed the central ornament. Nor have I eaten a better dinner than the one then served. The only servant was a black giant, who waited with a dexterity very singular in such a place ; and the guests of the captain were the young doctor, the Scotsman known as Dick the Ranter, and myself. The Scotsman alone displayed signs of that rollicking spirit of dare-devil which had characterised the meeting in Paris ; but the captain soon silenced him.

“D’ye ken that we’ve no said grace ?” remarked the lantern-jawed fellow, as we sat to table ; and then, raising his hands in impudent mockery, he began to utter some blasphemy, but Black turned upon him as with the growl of a wild beast.

“To the devil with that,” said he. “Hold your tongue, man !”

The Scotsman looked up at the rebuke as though a thunderbolt had hit him.

“Verra weel, mon ; verra weel,” he muttered ; “but ye’re unco melancholy the night, unco melapcholy.” And then he fell to the silence of consumption, eating prodigiously of all that was set before him ; but in high dudgeon, as a man rebuked unworthily. Of the others, the doctor alone talked, chatting fluently of many European cities, and proving himself no mean *raconteur*. I listened in the hope of getting some idea of what was intended in my case ; also, if that could be,

of the situation of this strange place in which I found myself ; for as yet I knew not if it were to the North of America ; or, indeed, in what part of the Arctic Sea it might be. To my satisfaction the captain made no attempt to conceal the information from me. The first occasion of his speaking during dinner was in answer to a remark of mine that I found the room very pleasantly warm.

"Yes," he said, "you must feel the change, although you will feel it more when we get winter here. You know where you are, of course."

I said unsuspectingly that I had not the faintest idea, when he cast a quick glance at the doctor, and the latter slapped me on the back quite joyously.

"Bravo !" he cried. "That prevents our putting one unpleasant question to you, anyway. I knew that your innuendo in the cabin was all make-believe."

"Of course it was," added the captain : "but the knowledge of it saves our bustling you. However, this isn't the time for talk of that sort. I may tell you, since you do not know, that you are on the west coast of Greenland, and that there is a Danish settlement not fifty miles from you—although we don't leave cards on our neighbours."

He called for champagne then, and gave a toast—"The new recruit !", I did not raise my glass with the others, which he saw, and became stern.

"Well," said he, "I won't have you hurried, and you're my guest until I put the straight question to you. When that happens you won't think twice about the answer, for we can be very nasty, I assure you. Now try a cigar. These are good. They came from the collection of Lord Remingham, who was on his way to America a few weeks ago."

"And met with an unfortunate accident," said the doctor, with mock seriousness, which was taken up by the Scotsman, who remarked in his best drawl—"May his soul ken rest !" and they all shouted with infamous laughter, but I listened with a morbid interest when the doctor continued—

"It's astonishing how good the quality of the tobacco and the champagne is on board the ocean-going steamers ; now this Bolinger '84 was the special pride of the skipper of the *Catalania*, which unhappily sank in the Atlantic through the sheer impudence of the man who commanded her. As he liked it so much, I broke a bottle over his head before we sent him to the devil, with five hundred others."

"You may say, in fact, that he made the acquaintance o' the auld man wi' the flavour o' this gude stuff on him," said the Scotsman, which made them laugh again ; but Black was satiated with the banter, and he rose from the table suddenly as the man Four-Eyes entered.

"This pleasant party must disperse," he said to me ; "you can go to the quarters we have provided for you, unless you would like to see more of us. We are well worth seeing, I think, and we may give you some idea of our other side."

"I should like to see everything you can show me," I replied, being aflame with curiosity to know all that the strange situation could teach me ; and then he made a motion for the others to follow, and we passed from the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONE SHALL LIVE.

THE way from the dining-room was through a long passage, lighted with arc lamps at intervals, and having the doors of many rooms on the right-hand side of it. Several of these doors were open; and I saw the interiors of well-furnished bedrooms, of smaller sitting-rooms, and of a beautifully-furnished billiard-room. At the end of the passage, we descended a flight of stairs to another landing, where there was a steep rock-slope leading right through the cliff almost to the level of the water. This proved the way to a small stretch of beach which was at the uppermost end of the fjord; and here I found several substantial buildings of stone, evidently for the use of Black's company. The largest of the houses seemed to be a kind of a hall, well lighted by arc lamps. Into this we passed, lifting a heavy curtain of skins; and seated there, on all sorts of rough lounges and benches were the men I had seen in Paris, with fifty or sixty others, no less ferocious-looking or more decently clad. There were negroes in light check suits and red flannel shirts; Americans in velveteen coats and trousers; Italians muffled up in jerseys; Spaniards playing cards before the roaring fire; half-castes smoking cheroots and drinking from china pots; Englishmen lying wrapped in rugs, asleep, or bawling songs to a small audience, which gave a chorus back in mellifluous curses; Russians drunk with spirits; Frenchmen chattering; Chinese mooningly silent; over all an atmosphere of smoke and foul odours, of fetid warmth and stifling heaviness.

As we entered the place the din was deafening, a medley of shouts and oaths, of songs and execrations; but it ceased when the captain bawled "Silence!" and an unusual stillness prevailed. The man Four-Eyes, who was always the immediate "go-between" so far as the captain and crew were concerned, at once put chairs for us near the huge fireplace, setting a great armchair for the skipper, with a small table whereon were many papers, and a small wooden hammer such as the chairman of a meeting commonly uses. Black took his seat in the great chair, with the doctor, the Scotsman, and myself around him; and then he harangued the men.

"Boys," he said, "we're home again. I give you luck on it—and swill it down in liquor."

I noticed that he had put on with his entry into the room all his old fierceness of manner and coarseness. He shouted out his words whenever he spoke, and emphasised them with bangs of the hammer upon the table. The call for wine was answered by some of the niggers fetching in cases of champagne, and soon the stuff was running in every part of the hall. The captain waited until the men were drinking, and then he continued—

"I guess, boys, the next thing to do is to make our calculations. We've had a smart month's work, and there's a matter of two hundred and fifty pounds a man waiting for you when next you foot it in New York. That's my calculation; and if there's one of you doubts it, he can see the figures."

He waited for them to speak, but they gave him only a great shout of approval, when he became more serious.

"You know, lads, there'll be a spell of holiday here for you, which you may reckon that I regret as much as any of you. The skipper of the American cruiser has made hell in Europe, and there's twenty cruisers out after us if there's one. That I snap my fingers at; but fighting isn't the game for you and me, who are looking for dollars; and we won't hurt to be low until the spring. Has any man got anything to say against that?"

There was not a word in answer to the threatening question; and then Black, bracing himself up to anger, went on—

"I now come to speak of a bit of business which you all want to hear about. There was two of you refused a double watch when we left the Yankee cruiser. Let 'em step forward."

One man, a dark-visaged Russian, with a yellow beard, stepped to the table at the words, but he was alone.

"Where is Dave Skinner?" asked the captain in a calm, but horridly meaning, voice.

"I guess he's sleeping on it," said the man Roaring John, whom I noticed for the first time, curled up on a bench in the corner, the bandages still upon his face.

"Kick him awake, the blear-eyed bullock," said Black, and the kicking was done right heartily; the subject, a huge man with dark hair, closely cropped, and a stubbly beard, rising to his feet and looking round him like one dazed with strong drink.

"Walk," said he, speaking to Roaring John, "you big-booted swine, what d'ye reckon ez you want along o' me?"

"Ask the skipper, cuss," replied the other, pushing the sleepy man forward to the chair where the Russian stood; and then Black began to speak to them quite calmly—

"Boys," he said, "I got it agen you that you refused my orders, and refused them at a pinch when me and the rest of 'em ran for our lives. Each of you lays the blame for this on the other, and I'm not going to haggle about that. You know what we're bound by, and that I can't go beyond what's written any more than you can go beyond it. There are two of you in this, and you settle your own differences—one of you lives. John, give 'em knives!"

As I heard these words, amazed and doubting, the men, without any other incitement, and uttering no remark, stripped off their coats and stood naked to the waists. The crew about left off their games and drew near, forming a ring round the men, who had taken up great clasp-knives, and were evidently to fight for their very lives. I knew then the meaning of the words "One of you lives:" and an excitement, strange and full of morbid interest, took possession of me.

That the men were to fight, and fight to the death, was sufficiently terrible; but a savour of horror was added to the dish by the flagrant unfairness of the conditions under which they fought. The American, Skinner, was thickly built, and of a sturdy physique. He had the better of his man in height, in reach, in physical strength; for Tovotsky, as I heard the Russian called, was a man of small stature, rather a shred of a man, full hairy about his breast, yet giving small signs of hardihood, or of power. It seemed to me that he might well have protested against the manner of the contest, and urged that a fight with knives would go to the stronger, skill being no part of it; but he said nothing, wearing an air of sullen determination, while his antagonist bellowed at him as though to overawe him by cheap bravado.

"Stand up right here, so ez I ken stick you, boss," he cried, when they faced each other; adding as the Russian dodged him: "What, my hearty, have ye got the taste of it already?—now steady, ye yellow-haired buzzard; steady, ye skunk, while I make hog's meat of you."

They stood crouched like beasts, or revolved about each other, the gleaming blades poised in the air, their left hands seeking holding-place. Skinner struck first, his knife shining bright against the light as he slashed at Tovotsky's throat, but the Russian doubled down between his legs, and the pair fell heavily a yard away from each other.

"Slit him as he lies, Dave!" "End him, Tov!" "Do you reckon you're abed?" These and other equally elegant exclamations fell from the lips of the crew, as the men lay dazed, fearful of mischief if they rose. But the Russian was first up, and springing at the other, who rolled aside as he came, he sent his knife home in his opponent's back, and a great shout of "First blood!" turned me sick with the terror of it. Nor could I look at them for some minutes, fearing to see a more repulsive spectacle; but when next I saw them, they were crouching again, and the American was silent, undoubtedly suffering from his wound, which bled freely. Presently he made another spring at Tovotsky, who ducked down, but got a slit across his shoulder, whereon he set up a howl of pain, and ran round and round the ring; while the other followed him making lunges terrible to see, but doing no more mischief. The effort took the

breath out of both of them, and they paused at last, panting like dogs, and drinking spirits which their friends brought them. When they resumed again, it was by mutual agreement, rushing at each other and gripping. Each man then had got hold of the right hand of his antagonist, so that the deadly knives were powerless, while the pair struggled, trying to "back-heel" each other. Round and round they went, bumping against their fellows in the circle, straining their muscles so that they cracked, uttering fierce cries in the agony of the struggle for life. But the American had the strength of it, and he forced Tovotsky's hand back upon him, stabbing him with his own knife again and again, so that the man's breast was covered with wounds, and he seemed like soon to faint from weakness. It might have been that he would have died where he stood, but by some terrible effort he forced himself free; and with the howl of a wild beast, he thrust his own knife to the hilt in the American's side. It broke at the handle; but the long blade was left embedded in the flesh, and the force of the blow was so overwhelming that Skinner drew himself straight up with death written in his protruding eyes and distorted features. Yet he had strength to seek vengeance, for his antagonist had now no weapon left to him, which the American saw, and ran after him with a scream of rage; when Tovotsky fled, breaking the ring, and scudding round the great room like a maniac. There Skinner followed him, crying with pain at every movement, almost foaming at the mouth as his wiry enemy eluded him. At last the Russian approached the door, his opponent being within a few feet of him, but the smaller man fell headlong through the curtain, and at that the death-agony came upon Skinner. He stopped as though held in a vice, hurled his knife at the Russian, and fell down dead. The men gave a great shout, and rushed from the place to find the other; but they brought him in dead as he had fallen, and far from being moved at the ghastly sight, they holloaed and bellowed like bulls, coming to reason only at the skipper's cry.

"Take 'em up to the cavern, some of you there, and lay 'em side by side to cool," he said brutally, and his orders were instantly obeyed. Others of the crew brought buckets and swabs unbidden, and cleansed the place, after which Black addressed the men again as though the terrible scene was a thing of common happening.

"Before I give you good-night," he said, "I want to tell you that we've got a stranger with us; but he's here to stay, and he's my charge."

"Has he 'jined?" asked the bleary-eyed Yankee, who had eyed me with much curiosity; but the captain answered—

"That's my affair, and you keep your tongue still if you don't want me to cut it out; he'll join us by-and-by."

"That's agen rules," said the man Roaring John, loafing up with others, who seemed to resent the departure.

"Agen what?" asked Black in a tone of thunder, turning on the fellow a ferocious gaze; "agen what, did you remark?"

"Agen rules," replied Roaring John; "his man broke my jaw, and I'll pay him, oh, you guess; it's not for you to go agen what's written no more than us."

Black's anger was evident, but he held it under.

"Maybe you're right," he said carelessly; "we've made it that no stranger stays here unless he joins, except them in the mines—but I've my own ideas on that, and when the time comes I'll abide by what's done. That time isn't yet, and if any man would like to dictate to me, let him step out—maybe it's you, John?"

The fellow slunk away under the threat, but there were mutterings in the room when we left; and I doubt not that my presence was freely discussed. This did not much concern me, for Black was master beyond all question, and he protected me.

We went back with him to the long passage where I had seen the doors of bed-chambers, and there he bade me good-night. The doctor showed me into a room in the passage, furnished both as a sitting-room and a bedroom, a chamber cut in the solid rock, but with windows towards the sea; and when he had seen to the provisions for my comfort, he, too, wept his way. But first he said—

"You must have been born under a lucky star: you're the first man to whom Black ever gave an hour's grace."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEN OF DEATH.

THE bed in which I lay was wondrous soft and downy ; and the cold gave me deep sleep, so that I awoke at a late hour to find the sun streaming through my rock window, and the negro telling me, as he was wont to do in the ship, that my bath was ready. The bath-room lay away a few paces from my chamber ; but the water that flowed from the silver taps was icily cold ; and I shivered after my plunge, though the beauty and luxury of the place compelled my admiration. It was no ordinary bath-room, even in its arrangement, the great well of water being large enough to swim in, and the basin of pure white marble ; while soft and brightly-coloured rugs were laid on the couches around, and the arched roof was Eastern in design and decoration. When we returned to my sleeping-place, I found the bed curtained off, leaving a commodious apartment, with books, armchairs, a writing-table, and a fire-place, in which a coal fire burned brightly. But the greater surprise was the view from my window, a view over a sunlit fjord, away to mountain peaks, snow-capped and shining ; and between them to a vista of an endless snow-plain, white, dazzling, and not altogether unmonotonous, yet relieved by the nearer patches of green and almost garden-land which seemed to stretch towards the sea.

My new home was, as I had thought, upon the side of a fjord which led through a cañon to the outer basin. There was beach at the upper end of it, and grass-land where several canoes and kayaks lay ; and I saw that many of the men who had watched the horrors of the night were working lustily now, dragging stores and barrels from a heavily-charged screw steamer which was anchored near the beach. The rocks which bound the opposite side of the bay did not appear to be cut for dwellings as on our side ; but I saw trace of several passages in them ; and away above them there was a small mountain peak by which a river of ice ran into the sea. But of the outer cave I could observe nothing ; or of the shore itself, though away at a greater distance, over some of the ravines, I made out the clear blue of the Atlantic, and a waste of peaceful water.

The doctor came to me while I was at breakfast. He was very cheerful, and began to talk at once.

"The captain sends you his compliments," he said ; "and hopes you have slept. *Entre nous*, you know, he doesn't care a brass button for such things, as we saw last night ; but if we didn't keep discipline here, we should have our throats cut in a week."

I gave him civil words in return, and he went on to speak of personal matters.

"The men are inclined to resent the exception that has been made in your case. I am afraid it will lead to trouble by-and-by, unless, of course, you choose to close with the offer that Black makes to you."

"You speak of an 'exception,' and an 'offer,'" said I ; "but for the life of me, I don't quite know what you mean. How has an exception been made in my case, and what is the offer?"

"I will tell you in a minute ; Captain Black has brought thirty or forty Englishmen of your position, or better, to this place within the last three years ; not one of them has lived twenty hours from the time he set foot in the rock-house. As for the offer, it is evident to you that we could not permit any man to share our privileges, and to be one of us, unless he shared also our dangers and our risks. In other words, the time will come when you must sign an agreement such as I have signed, and these men have signed—and I don't believe that you will refuse. It is either that, which means full liberty, plenty of money, a life which is never monotonous, often amusing, and sometimes dangerous ; or an alternative which I really won't dilate on."

"You lay it all down very clearly," I replied, "but you can have my answer now if you like."

He raised his hand laughingly.

"Curse all emotion," he said, "it affects digestion. Black won't hurry you—why, for the life of me, I can't tell, but he won't. You can't do better than take things easy, and see the place. I've brought you a 'Panama,' for the sun can advertise himself at eight bells still; and if you have nothing better to do, put it on, and light a cigar as we stroll round."

The idea of inspecting the place pleased me. I followed Doctor Osbart—for such his name was—down the rock slope we had trodden on the previous evening; and thence to the beach, hard and baked with the sun. The men, who had ceased the labour of discharging the steamer, were lying about on the grassy knolls, smoking and dozing, and they cast no friendly glances on me as we passed along the shore round the edge of the bay, and mounted a soft grass slope which led to the cliff-head on the other side. It was a long walk, but not unpleasant, in the crisp, sweet, odour-bearing air; and when we had attained the summit, a glorious seascape was spread before us. All about were the white peaks and the basaltic rocks, towering above ravines where ice flowed, or falling away to bright green pastures which reindeer trod. The coast-line was lofty and awe-inspiring, often showing a precipitous face to the sea, which beat upon it with the booming of heavy breakers; and spread surf all foaming upon its ridges and promontories. I stood entranced with the vigour born of that life-giving breeze; and the young doctor stood with me watching. At last he touched me upon the shoulder, and pointed to the first cave, where the nameless ship lay snugly moored in the creek, with many seamen at work upon her.

"Look," he said, "look there, where is the instrument of our power. Is not she magnificent? Do you wonder at my warmth—yet why? for without her we here are helpless children, victims of poverty, of law, of society. With her we defy the world. In all Europe there is no like to her; no ship which should live with her. Ask her for speed, and she will give you thirty knots; tell her that you have no coal, and she will carry you day after day and demand none. Aboard her, we are superior to fleets and nations; we ravage where we will; we laugh at the fastest cruisers and the biggest warships. Are you surprised that we love her?"

He spoke with extraordinary enthusiasm—the enthusiasm of a fanatic or a lover. The great ship reflected the sun's glow from her many bright parts, and was indeed a beauteous object, yet swan-like, the guns uncovered as the men worked at them, and a newer lustre added to her splendour.

"She is a wonderful ship," said I, "and built of metal I never met with."

"Her hull is constructed of phosphor-bronze," he answered, "and she is driven by gas. The metal is the finest in the world for all ship-building purposes, but its price is ruinous. None but a man worth millions could build the like to her."

"Then Captain Black is such a man?" I said.

"Exactly, or he wouldn't be the master of her—and of Europe. Doesn't it occur to you that you were a fool ever to set out on the enterprise of coping with him?"

I did not answer the taunt, but looked seaward, away across the west, where Roderick and Mary were. The boundless spread of water reminded me how small was the hope that I should ever see them again; ever hear a voice I had known in the old time, or clasp a hand in fellowship that had oft been clasped. They thought me dead, no doubt; and to take the grief from them was forbidden, then and until the end of it, I felt sure.

But the doctor was still occupied with the great ship, looking down upon her as she lay, and he called my attention to a fact I had not been cognisant of.

"We are coaling here, do you see?" he said. "It was one of Black's inspirations to choose Greenland for his hole; it is one of the few comparatively uninhabited countries in the world where coal is to be had, somewhat of a poorer quality than the anthracite we are accustomed to use, but very welcome when we are close pressed. He is filling his bunkers now, in case we should decide to break up this party before the end of the winter. That will depend on our friends over in

Europe. We have given them a nightmare, but it won't last, and they'll go to bed again to get another."

"Who are your miners?" I asked suddenly, interrupting him, for I saw that the rock above the nameless ship was pierced with tunnels leading down to the shafts, and that forty or fifty coal-black fellows were shooting the stuff into the bunkers:

"These are our guests," he said lightly, "honest British seamen whose voyages have been interrupted. We give them the alternative of work in the mine, or their liberty on the snow yonder."

"But how can they live in such a place?"

He laughed as though the whole thing were a joke.

"They don't live," said he. "They die like vermin."

"I'm evidently afloat with a lot of fine-spirited fellows," said I; "or, to put it in plain English, with a beautiful company of blackguards."

"Why not say with a lot of devils—that would be more accurate! But you can't forget that you came to us unasked, and now you must stop."

His leer at this sally was terribly expressive, and I showed all the contempt I felt for him, turning away to the sea fondly, as the hope of my liberty, since thence only should it come. He read my thoughts, perhaps, taking me by the arm with unsought pretence of kindness, and he said—

"Don't let's dissect each other's morals, we have the place to see, and you must be getting hungry. I will show you only one thing before we go—it is our cemetery."

It was not a fascinating prospect, yet I followed him across the high plateau to the creek wherein the rock-house was, but to the side which was opposite to my bedroom window. There he descended the face of the cliff by rough steps; and entered one of the passages which I had observed from my chamber. The passage was long and low, lighted by ships' lanterns at intervals, and I discovered that it led to a great cavern which opened to the face of one of the glaciers going down to the sea on the further side. Nor have I entered a sepulchre which ever gave me such an infinite horror of death, or such a realisation of its terrors.

The end of the cavern was nothing but a wall of ice, clear as glass, admitting a soft light which illuminated the whole place with dim rays, making it a place of mystery and of awe. Yet I had not noticed its more dreadful aspect at the first coming; and, when I did so, I gave a cry of horror and turned away my face, fearing to see again that most overwhelming spectacle. For blocks had been cut from the clear ice, and the dead seaman had been laid in the frozen mass just as they had died, without coffin or other covering than their clothes. There they lay, their faces upturned, many of them displaying all the placid peacefulness of death; but some grinned with horrible grimaces, and the eyes of some started from their heads, and there were teeth that seemed to be biting into the ice, and hands clenched as though the fierce activity of life pursued them beyond the veil. Yet the frightful mausoleum, the den of death, was pure in its atmosphere as a garden of snow, cool as grass after rain, silent as a tomb of the sea. Not a sound even of dripping water, not a motion of life without, not a sigh or dull echo disturbed its repose. Only the dead with hands uplifted, the dead in frozen rest, the dead with the smile of death, or the hate of death, or the terror of death written upon their faces, seemed to watch and to wait in the chamber of the sepulchre.

I have said that the sight terrified me; yet the whole of my fear I could not write, though the pen of Death himself were in my hands. So profoundly did the agony of it appeal to me that for many minutes together I dare not raise my eyes, could scarce restrain myself from flying, leaving the dreadful picture to those that should care to gaze upon it. Yet its spell was too terrible, the morbid magnetism of it too potent; and I looked again and again, and turned away, and looked yet once more; and went to the ice to gaze more closely at the dead faces, and was so carried away with the trance of it that I seemed to forget the dead men, and thought that they lived. When I recalled myself, I observed Doctor Osbart watching me intently.

"A strange place, isn't it?" he said. "Observe it closely, for some day you will be here with the others."

I shuddered at his thought, and muttered, "God forbid!"

"Why?" he asked, hearing it. "It's not a very fearful thing to contemplate. I would sooner lie in ice than in earth—and that ice is not part of the glacier; it never moves. It is bound by the rock there which cuts it off from the main mass."

"It's a horrible sight!" I exclaimed shivering.

"Not at all," he said. "These men have been our friends. I like to see them, and in a way one can talk to them. Who can be sure that they do not hear?"

It was almost the thought of a religious man, and it amazed me. I was even about to seek explanation, but a sudden excitement came upon him, and he raved incoherent words, crying—

"Yes, they hear, every one of them. Dick, you blackguard, do you hear me? Old Jack, wake up, you old gun! Thunder, you've killed many a one in your day. Move your pins, old Thunder! There's work to do—work to do—work to do!"

His voice rang out in the cavern, echoing from vault to vault. It was an awful contrast to hear his raving, and yet to see the rigid dead before him. My surmise that Doctor Osbart was a madman was undoubtedly too true; and, horrified at the desecration, I dragged him from the cavern into the light of the sun, and there I found myself trembling like a leaf, and as weak as a child. The cold crisp breeze brought the doctor to his senses; but he was absent and wandering, and he left me at the door of my room.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MURDERS IN THE COVE.

FOR some days I saw no more of Doctor Osbart or of Captain Black. My existence in the rock-house seemed to be forgotten by them, and where they were I knew not; but the negro waited on me every day, and I was provided with generous food and many books. I spent the hours wandering over the cliffs, or the grass plains; but I discovered that the place was quite surrounded by ice-capped mountains and by snow-fields, and that any hope of escape by land was more than futile. Once or twice during these days I saw the man "Four-Eyes," and from him gained a few answers to my questions. He told me that Captain Black kept up communication with Europe by two small screw steamers disguised as whalers; that one of them, the one I saw, was shortly to be despatched to England for information; and that the other was then on the American coast gleaning all possible news of the pursuit; also charging herself with stores for the colony.

"Bedad, an' we're nading 'em," he said in his best brogue, "for, wanting the victuals, it's poor sort av order we'd be keepin', by the Saints. Ye see, young 'un, it's yerself as is at once the bottom an' the top av it. 'Wot's he here for?' says half av 'em, while the other half, which is the majority, they says, 'When's the old 'un a-sending him to Europe to cut our throats?' they says; and there's the divil among 'em—more divil than I ever seed."

"It must be dull work wintering here," I said at hazard; and he took up the words mighty eagerly.

"Ay, an' ye've put yer finger on it; sure, it's just then that there's work to do combing ov' em down, young 'un. If I was the skipper, I wudn't sit here with my feet in my pockets as it was, but I'd up an' run for it. Why, look you, we're short av victuals already; and we turn fifty av the hands in the mine ashore to-morrow!"

"Turn them ashore—how's that?"

"Why, giv' 'em their liberty, I'm thinking: poor divils, they'll die in the snow, every one av them."

I made some poor excuse for cutting short the conversation, and left him, excited beyond anything by the thought which his words gave me. If fifty men were to be turned free, then surely I could count on fifty allies; and fifty-one strong hands could at least make some show even against the ruffians of the rock-house. Give them arms, and a chance of surprise, and who knows? I said. But it was evident beyond doubt that the initiative must be with me, and that, if arms and a leader were to be found, I must find them.

It might have been a mad hope, but yet it was a hope; and I argued: Is it better to clutch at the veriest shadow of a chance, or to sit down and end my life amongst scoundrels and assassins? Unless the man "Four-Eyes" deliberately deceived me, Black would connive at the murder of fifty British seamen before another twenty-four hours had sped. These men would have all the anger of desperation to drive them to the attack; and I felt sure that if I could get some arms into their hands, and help them to wise strategy, the attempt would at the least be justifiable. It remained only to ascertain the probability of getting weapons, and of joining the crew without molestation; and to this task I set myself with an energy and expectation which caused me to forget for the time my rascally environment, and the peril of my very existence in the ice-haven.

During the remaining hours of the day I engaged myself in searching the houses on the beach; but, although I looked into many of them, I found no sign of armoury, or, indeed, of anything but plain accommodation for living. Here and there in some rude dormitories I encountered lazy loafers, who cursed at the sight of me; and I did not approach the great common-room, for I knew the danger of that venture. But I made such a tour of the block of buildings as convinced me of the futility of any attempt to get arms from them; for such as were storehouses had iron doors and heavy locks upon them, and elsewhere there was scarce so much as a pistol. The discouragement of the vain search was profound, and in great gloom and abandoned hope I mounted the steep passage to my own apartment, and sat down to ask myself, if I should not at once surrender the undertaking, and preserve my own skin. That, no doubt, was the counsel of mere prudence; yet the knowledge that fifty men would stand by me to the assault on the citadel of crime and cruelty haunted me and drove me from the craven prompting. I remembered in a welcome inspiration that Black had a stand of Winchester rifles in his study; I had seen them when I dined with him; and although there were not more than half-a-dozen of them, I had hoped that they would suffice, if I could get them, with knives and any revolvers I might lay hands upon, to hold a ring of men against the company, or at least to warrant a covert attack on the buildings below. This thought I hugged to me all day, going often to the iron platform above the creek to know if there were any sign of the release of the men, or of preparation for getting rid of them; but I could see none, and I waited expectantly, for it were idle to move a hand until those who should be my allies had their so-called liberty.

Towards evening, when I was weary with the watching, I returned to my room and found that the negro had spread the tea-table as usual; and I drank a refreshing draught, and began to question him, if he knew anything of that which was going on below. He shook his head stupidly; but presently, when I had repeated the question, he said, laughing and showing his huge teeth—

"Begar, you wait—plenty fire jess now—plenty knock and squeal; oh yes, sar."

"Are they going to murder the men?" I asked aghast.

"No murder ; oh no, sar, no murder, but plenty fight—ah, there he goes, sar !"
There was the sound of a gun-shot below in the creek ; and I went to my window, and getting upon a chair, I saw the whole of a cruel scene. Some twenty of these seamen, black as they had come from the coal-shaft, were going ashore from a long-boat ; while an electric launch was bringing twenty more from the outer creek where the nameless ship lay. But the men, who had first landed were surrounded by the others of Black's company ; and were being driven towards the hills at the back ; and so to the great desolate plain of snow where no human being could long retain life. From my open window, I could hear the words of anger, the loud oaths, the shouts, could see the blows which were received, and the blows which were given. Anon the fight became very general. The pirates hit lustily with the butt-ends of their pistols ; the honest fellows used their fists, and many a man they laid his length upon the rock. Yet there was no question of the sway of victory, for the prisoners were unarmed, and the others outnumbered them hopelessly. Inch by inch they gave way, were driven towards the ravines and the countless miles of snow-plain ; and as the battle, if such you could call it, raged, the armed lost control of themselves and began to shoot with murderous purpose. Death at last was added to the horrors, and, as body after body rolled down the rocky slope and fell splashing into the water, those unwounded took panic at the sight, and fled with all speed away up the side of the glacier mount ; and so, as I judged it must be, to their death in that frozen refuge beyond.

When all was quiet I shut my window, and sat in my chair to think. The negro had left me, and the whole place was very still. Neither Black nor the doctor had showed during the scene of the massacre (for I could call it nothing else) ; and in the rock-house itself there was not so much as a footfall. I began to hope that the master of the place might chance to be away ; and when darkness had fallen I went into the long passage then deserted, and found the door of his sitting-room ajar, but the place was dim within ; and I feared to make an attempt to get the arms until I knew that all slept. But one misfortune could lie between myself and the aid which I should bear to these men—it was the chance that Black locked the door of his study when he slept. If he did not, I could get the rifles, and convey them across the bay to the other fellows ; if he did, all hope were gone.

At seven o'clock I dined as usual, no one coming to me ; and at eight the negro had cleared away the repast, and had left me for the night. I closed my own door, and for three hours or more I paced my chamber, the fever of anticipation and of design burning me as with fire. It must have been eleven o'clock when at last I put out my light, and listened in the passage ; yet heard nothing, not even the echo of a distant sound.

Of the doors about, the majority were closed ; but the doctor's was open, and his room was in darkness, so that I began to fear that he was closeted with Black ; and I went very stealthily, having left my boots behind me, to the man's study, and found that door ajar as it had been when I had come to it some hours before. This discovery set me almost drunk with hope. There was no doubt that both the men were away from their rooms, so that my time could not have been better chosen ; and, more fearless in their absence, I pushed the door wide open and began to feel my way in the blinding dark.

My first proceeding was to run upon some slight article of furniture, and to overturn it. The crash that followed echoed through the vaulted passages, and I stood quite still, thinking that all chance of success had gone with the mishap. But no sound followed, and after many minutes I went on again with great care, feeling my way as a cat, quite sure that at last I should succeed. Twice I went round the room, and could not put my hand upon the rifles ; but at the third attempt I found them, and gave a sigh of relief. Then an overwhelming terror struck me chill and powerless. My sigh was echoed from the corner by the window ; and a low chuckle of laughter followed it. I stood as a man petrified, my hand upon a gun, but my nerves strained to a tension that was horrible to bear. Who was there with me ? By whom was I watched ?

Alas ! I knew in another moment, when the electric light flooded the chamber, and I saw Black sitting at his writing-table, observing me, a jeer upon his lips, and all the terrible malice of his nature written in his keen and mocking eyes. I stood transfixed by that searching gaze, held spellbound by the fascination of the obvious danger, my hand still upon one of the rifles, yet trembling with the agitation of discovery. Words rose to my lips—excuses, pleadings ; but they died away in my throat, and I could not utter them. Plans for the undoing of that which had been done, ways of escape, efforts to gain time, suggested themselves to me, but remained suggestions. I could do nothing but stand and sway my body as a victim before a python—the prey before a snake that is about to strike.

We must have watched each other thus for a minute or more. I saw during those moments when I was bereft of all power that the man had a revolver cocked at his left hand, but a pen in his right ; while manuscript lay before him, so that he must have been in the room for some time, and had extinguished his light only at my coming. And he had heard me quit my own chamber, I did not doubt ; yet this surprised me, for I had no shoes upon my feet, and had walked with the stealth of a cat. Indeed, he appeared to read the fleeting speculations of my thought, and at last to take pity on my position, for he leant over the table, and drew near to it a lounge on which the skin of a polar bear was spread.

"Sit here," he said, and at the bluff word my nerve came back to me. I sat before him, facing him with less fear. Yet it was humiliating to be treated almost as a child, and I knew from the inflexion of his voice that he spoke to me then as one would speak to a school-lad who had played truant. And in this tone he continued—

"You're a smart boy, and have ideas ; but, like all little boys, your ideas don't go far enough. I was just the same when I was your age, always trying to climb perpendicular places, and always falling down again. When you're older, you look to see what your hold's like before you begin. Meanwhile, you're like a little dog barking at a bull, and you're precious lucky not to be over the hedge by this time—maybe the bull doesn't mind you, maybe he's waiting a day—but take his advice and go to kennel awhile."

He said this half-laughing, and in no sense fiercely ; but his words angered me beyond restraint, and I could have struck him as he sat. He saw my anger, and ceased his provocation.

"Silly lad," he said again, "silly beyond expression to put your head into a business which never concerned you, and to stake your life on a struggle which must have only one end. Don't you think so ?"

At this I plucked up courage and answered him—

"I came here to-night to stop your devilry in murdering fifty innocent men ;" but he started up at the words and raved like a maniac.

"And who made you judge, you puppy ?" he cried. "Who set you to watch me, or give your opinions on what I do or what I don't do ? Who asked you whether you liked it or didn't like it, you sneaking little brat ? I wonder I let you live to spit your dirty words in my face !"

His anger was fierce, terrible as a tornado. His teeth gnashed, his hands shook, he rolled in his chair like a great wounded beast ; but when he saw that I was unmoved, he fell quiet again, and wiping his forehead, where the sweat had gathered thickly, he said in a low, coaxing voice—

"Don't compel me, lad, to do what I have meant not to do. You're here for good or ill, and if you wish to keep your life, put a control on your tongue. These men are nothing to you ; they're lazy hogs that the world's well rid of—let 'em die, and save your own carcass. You've been here days now—the first man that ever lived among us without signing our papers. But you can't stay that way any longer. You know this business. You've a straight notion that my hand's agen Europe, and, for the matter of that, agen the world, too ; those that share with me shall swing with me, and if I burn when it's done, by the devil himself they shall burn too. It isn't of my asking that you're amongst us, or that you took up the work of the

hound; Hall, who put the first nail in his coffin that night he came to my bed at Spezia. I saw him there, though he thought me sleeping; and that night I wrote death against his name, as I wrote it against yours when you entered my room in Paris. There's reasons why I've broken my word in your case, though you'll never know 'em; but there's no reason why you shouldn't swear to go through it with me and mine, man for man, life with life, be it rope's end or bullet, to rot among the fish, or to share every mate among us what's got upon the sea. That's my question, and you'll answer it now, yes or no, plain word and no shuffle; meaning to you whether you go on as you've gone on in the past, or freeze amongst the others lying up there in the cavern; whether you swim in money, as my lot swim in it, or get bullets in you thick as hail from northward. That's my question, I say again, and there's my papers. Sign 'em now, or you lie a corpse before an hour on the clock."

He leant over his writing-table and put the paper into my hands, a rough sheet of parchment, which he wished me to read. But my eyes were dimmed with the restless excitement of the situation, with the dread terror of the alternative put to me; and I saw nothing but lines of writing which swam before me. The silence of the room was terrible to bear; and it was as though I struggled for life while already in the tomb. My thoughts went hurriedly to Europe, to my home, to my friends; above all I recalled the night when Martin Hall went to his death, and his shadow seemed by me, his face beseeching me, his hand holding mine back from the pen that it would have clutched. During this time the man Black leant towards me, and watched me, expectancy in his face, threatening in his pose. Yet he did not speak, and my eyes left the paper and I gave him look for look, and from his face my glance passed to his right hand which held the pistol; and in that instant I took heart for a step which was the last mad design of a driven man.

"Give me the pen!" I said suddenly, rising and bending over the table.

He put the pen into my hands, and leant back with a chuckle of satisfaction; but the movement cost him the game. I clutched his pistol with a lightning grasp, and covered him with it—

"If you raise a finger I'll shoot you like a dog," I cried.

Then the man, who was no craven, sat motionless in his chair; and I saw the beads of terror falling from his forehead, but he betrayed no emotion, and his face might have been cut from marble. I had the muzzle of the pistol upon him, and I continued with greater confidence—

"If you raise your voice to call out, or if anyone comes to this room, you die where you sit."

He heard me then more calmly, and replied deliberately—

"Boy, you are the first that's bested Black."

"I'll take your word for that," I said; "but take care—you are moving your hand." He held it still at once, and continued—

"I'm caught like a rat in the hole. What do ye want? Name it, and I'll know how we stand!"

"I want my life—my life, now that I refuse to sign that paper."

"Yes," he said, "that's a fair request, though I can't say it's in my power to make it that way."

"It's in your power to stand with me—you can give the order that no man's to lay a finger on me, and you will?"

He thought a moment, looking straight down the barrel of the Colt. Then he said—

"Yes, I can't avoid that—I'll give you that."

"And my liberty on the first occasion offering."

"No," he replied very slowly and sternly; "that's more than the devil himself could offer you; they'd tear me to pieces."

There was no doubt that he had right in this; and I reflected that I could gain nothing whatever by holding out. There was just the hope that he would abide by his word in the matter of my personal safety, but more I could not look for. The man could only die, and, if he gave me freedom, his own men would requite

him as he said. I thought of this and put the pistol down; then I offered him my hand, and he jumped up from his seat, grasping it with a great clutch altogether painful to bear, while he dragged me to the light and looked at me with that curious expression I had noticed when first I met him in the room.

"You're a sound plank of a boy," he said: "shake my hand, young 'un, shake it hearty; go on, don't you think I mind; shake it right so, you beauty of a boy!"

What else he would have said or done, what new token of his repulsive favour he would have bestowed on me, I know not, but his wild antics were cut short by the sound of firing, rapid and oft repeated, which came to us from the shore of the cove below. At the first report he let go my hand and went to his window, from which he drew the curtain, so that I saw the whole bay lit with silver light from a full-risen moon, and the distant peaks as grim beacons above a land of rest; a land which once, perchance, flowered with exotic luxuriance, but which now wore the snow-silk mantle that had fallen upon countless centuries of its past. Yet the whole glory and entrancement of the perfect peace were for the moment ruined, for out on the snow there was a hungry crowd of starving souls, crying, I doubt not, for bread; and those to whom they cried answered them with their muskets, dyeing the glittering white with many a red stream, bringing many a hungered wretch to his last sleep in the frozen night of death. And out over the silence of the hills the cries for mercy rang as in bitterness to God, the dreadful cries of the weak, down-trodden beneath the feet of those who knew not God, the last scream of perishing souls, the sobs of strong men in their agony. In vain I closed my ears, shut out the sight from my eyes. The picture came to me again and again, the sound of the voices would not be hushed, and in turn I cried to Black—

"For God's sake, help those men, if you have anything but the instincts of a brute in you!"

He shrugged his shoulders defiantly. "What am I to do?" he asked.

"Stop the devil's work, and give the men bread, as I've just given you your life!"

There was a pause before he answered me, and I could see that an old nature and a new impulse fought within him. He did not give me any direct answer to my earnest appeal, but he snatched a rifle from a case and said—

"Take that pistol, and come on; you've fooled me once, and we'll make it even numbers. But it ain't as easy as cutting cheese, and there's blood to let."

I followed him down the passage to the beach, where he blew a whistle sharp and shrill, and the note had a strange ring as it echoed through the cañon.

"That'll wake 'em on the ship," he explained. "I'm not afeard of these, but there's fighting to be done—now lie behind me, and don't show till you're wanted."

He advanced towards the snow-plain and sang out—

"John, you there, Dick—hands to quarters, do you hear me? Move right quick, or I'll move you, by thunder!"

They put down their arms from their shoulders in blank amazement, and listened to him as he went on—

"There's enough down for one night, I reckon, and I'm not going to be kept awake by your cursed firing—what's to be done can be done in the morning; why, your boat-load of night rats, ain't any of you got sleep in you?"

They came round him slowly and sulkily, and he drove them to the big houses with pleasant oaths and fine round phrases. I lurked near him, but an American saw me and cried—

"Say, Cap'en, hev ye took to nursin' that boy ez ye seems so fond of?"

"Shut your jaw, or I'll shut it for you!" replied Black. "Is the boy your affair?"

"He's the affair of all of us, I calcerlate, an' some of us wishes to know particler is he's signed or no."

Black was smothered in anger, but he showed it only with that terrible growling of the voice, and his horrid calmness.

"Oh, you want to know, do you? Which of you, might I ask, is particler anxious about my business?"

There were thirty or forty of them round, and they pressed the closer at the question, as he continued—

"Let them as makes complaint step right here."

Only four joined the leader; but the captain suddenly snatched my revolver from me, and fired four shots; and for each shot a man dropped dead on the beach; but the American stood untouched. The appalling brutality of the action seemed to awe the rest of the crew. They stood motionless, dumb with their rage; but when they recovered themselves they rushed upon us with wild ferocity; and the Yankee fired at Black point-blank. I thought, truly, that the end was then; but I heard a shout from the water, and, looking there, I saw Dr. Osbart in the launch; and there was a Maxim gun in the bows of her.

"Clear that beach!" roared Black in awful passion; and instantly, as he dropped flat and I imitated him, there was a hail of bullets, and the main part of the crowd fell shrieking; but some threw themselves down, while many stiffened and rolled in death, and blood spouted from scores of wounds.

The victory was awful, instantaneous. As the men fled towards the hills, Black called after them—

"Bring to, you limp-gutted carrion, or I'll wipe you out, every one of you! Any man who'll save his throat, let him come here!"

At these words they turned back to a man, and came cowering to the water's edge. Thirty of their fellows lay dead or wounded on the stones, and many of those crawling towards us had bullets in their limbs. Yet Black had no thought for them.

"Where's your leader?" he asked, and they pointed to the American, who lay with the blood pouring from a wound in his left thigh.

"He's there, is he?" screamed the infuriated man. "The darned skunk's down, is he? Well, I'll cure him like a ham. Get torches, some of you and ice him in."

He was swaying with passion; yet, even regarding it, I could not understand what his order meant, and I asked—

"What are you going to do with the man?"

"What am I going to do with him?" he yelled, scarce noticing who spoke to him; "I'm going to bury him."

It was wonderful in that moment to see how the men, who had before defied him, then became as slaves at his command. A silence deep and profound rested upon them; even those with the captain watched him in his outrageous anger and were dumb; but all helped him in his ghastly work, and brought shovels and picks, which they carried to the higher plane of snow. As for the American, who sat upon the beach groaning with the pain of his wound, I do not know how any man could have wished to add to his hurt; yet he asked for no sympathy, and it was plain that he knew what they meant to do with him. At one time feverish ravings seized him, and he shook his fist at all around him; then he poured his anger upon Black, who listened to him, gratified that he should provoke it. And the more the man cursed, the greater satisfaction did the other show.

"We've got to die, both of us," said the American at last, ceasing his wilder oaths; "you en me, Black, en there isn't much ez we kin look for; but, if there's en Almighty God, I reckon ez He'll place this yere off my score, and lay it on yours, or there ain't no hell, an' there ain't no justice, and what seamen dreams of is lies—lies as your word is lies, en everything about your cursed ship. Go on, lay me right here as I lay now; but I'll rize agen you, and the day'll come when you'd give every dollar ye're worth to dig me up, and give me life agen."

The softer speech availed the poor fellow as little as the other. I felt then an exceeding pity for him, and I touched Black on the arm and was about to plead with him; but at the sight of me he raised his fist, and I moved away, seeing

by the light of his eyes that he was as much a madman in that moment as any maniac in Bedlam. For he stood foaming and muttering, his hands clenched, his hat upon the snow, great drops of sweat on his browed forehead. The haste of the men to get the picks was not half haste enough for him; and when they began to dig he hurried them the more, until a great pile of snow had been thrown out.

It was a weird scene—the most weird I have ever known. We stood in a snow-pit amongst the hills, and above us rose in grandeur the great pyramids of basalt and gneiss. There was no sign of living green thing, even of lichens or of moss, in that elevated plain above the sea; and the shrill call of the gulls was hushed in the greater stillness of the night. The moon, high in the unclouded sky, gave light far down into the crevasses—clear, silvered light that made a jewel of every higher point, and sprinkled the crests of the breakers as with floss of fire. Nor was there wind, even a breath of the night's breeze, but only the melancholy silence of the omnivorous frost, the boom of falling avalanche echoing in the ravines and the ice-caverns, the groans of the doomed man—a very *Miserere* amongst the hills, as down below amongst the dead upon the shore.

In the snow-plain, which was the centre of this northern desolation, they dug the grave of the living man. I watched from afar—held by what hideous power I knew not—and I saw them roll him over into the trench they had dug, and shovel the snow quickly upon him. He watched them, silent in his terror; but when his head only was uncovered he gave a shriek of agony, which rose like the great cry of a man going before his God, and ceased not to echo from height to height until long minutes had passed. Then all was hushed, for the cold mantle of death fell upon him. Slowly those who had done their work took up their tools and returned doggedly to the beach; but Captain Black was unable to move from the man who had put that last great curse upon him not five minutes gone. Bare-headed and alone, he stood at the snow-grave, and looked down upon the mound now sparkling with the crystals of the frost that bound it. And as he looked there came a great weird wailing from a distant hill, a piercing cry, as of another soul passing, and it echoed again and again from peak to peak and ravine to ravine—a wild “*ochone*,” that had sadness and grief and misery in it; and I knew that it was the cry from one of the seamen who had been turned from the mines—from one who mourned, perchance, the death of a friend or of a brother. Yet, at the cry, Black gave a great start, and shivering as a man struck down with a deadly chill, he passed from the grave to the beach. And this was the agony of his returning reason.

CHAPTER XX.

I QUIT ICE-HAVEN.

It was on the next afternoon, near to the setting of the sun, there having been unusual activity about the creek during the forenoon, that Doctor Osbart came to my room with great news for me.

“This business with the men has completely upset our plans,” said he. “Black hoped to winter here; and to let the hubbub in Europe quite subside before he put to sea again. Now he can’t do that, for there’ll be trouble just as long as the crew

eats its head off in this wilderness. There's only one thing that will keep the hands quiet, and that's excitement. After all, it's the same motive with most of us, from the gutter-beggar who lives on the hope of the next penny to the democrat who supports existence on a probable revolution. If we once get them away to sea, with money to win, and towns to riot in, we shall hear no more of this folly, and Black knows it. He has determined to sail to-night; and he'll take some of the men he put out of the mines to do the work of those who went down yesterday. I'm very glad, for I should have cut my throat if I'd been here the winter through, and I dare say you won't be displeased to get a change of quarters; but, before we talk of that, we must have the conditions."

"I won't sign that paper, and Black has been told so," cried I at once; "it's no good coming here again with that."

"You're premature," he replied, with a smile, "premature, as you always are. Isn't it time enough to discuss the paper when I bring it to you?"

"Then what have you to ask?" said I, prepared to hear of something which I must refuse, but longing with a great hope for the freedom of the sea.

"Simply this," he answered, "and, for the life of me, I don't see what the gov'nor driving at in your case; for he asks only that, if he take you from here, where you'd starve in a month if he left you, you shall give him your word, as a man of honour, that you will make no attempt to leave his ship without permission. Under no pretence or plea will you try to escape, and, whatever you see, you will not complain about when aboard with him. You are to hold no converse with the men, nor will you interfere with them in any work they do; and you will carry out this contract not only in the letter but in the spirit. If you will give me your word on that now, you can pack your trunk and come aboard without any fuss; but I don't disguise it from you, that any folly after this may cost you your life, and that if you have half a thought of playing us false, you'd better stop where you are."

I debated on the whole extent of his proposition, and made up my mind on it in a few moments. I was aware that, if I remained at the station, I could expect nothing but speedy death upon the ice, since the doctor had told me that the place would be deserted during the winter. Against this I had to ask myself, if my going aboard the nameless ship meant in any way approval of the occupation of those who sailed it; but this suggestion was too trivial, and I dismissed it in a moment; while the thought flashed across my mind that if I could but once be taken to European or American waters, there would be at least the probability that this man might fall into the hands of those who were seeking him. In that case liberty would come with his undoing; which was even more pleasant to think upon than to contemplate it with him yet free as a voracious beast of the seas.

"You accept?" said the doctor, who sat watching me as I thought these things; and I answered him without hesitation—

"I accept."

"The captain has your word of honour as between gentlemen?"

"As between—well, if you like it so—as between gentlemen."

The satire of the last word was too much for him, for he was one of the pleasantest fellows in his saner moments that I have ever met. We both laughed heartily, and then he said—

"But I'm forgetting, you've got no trunk, and I must lend you one. You're rather short of duds, I know, but we can rig you out until we get to Paris, and there the skipper will see to it—any way, so long as you've a coat thick enough, we won't criticise you in these parts; and I don't suppose you're thinking of garden parties."

"Anything but," I answered, as pleased as he was at the prospect of it all, and especially at the thought of quitting the ice-prison, if only for the winter; "I have neither clothes nor cash."

"Well, I don't see what you're going to do with the latter, just yet; but, man, you can just help yourself from the first Cunarder we stop—pshaw, don't look like that; wait until you feel the excitement of it all. Why, what is it but one ship against the world, big men on their knees to you, money enough to wade in, and a

fig for all the navies and all the fleets that ever left a port? I defy 'em to put a hand on the ship if they spend a million in the process. Come with us and see it all, and you'll say it's the most daring, the grandest, the most stupendous enterprise that man ever conceived."

It was no good to lift up one's voice against enthusiasm of this sort, so I let him lead me to his room, and took from him a trunk with some linen. As he said, it was more convenient to have my own things, and we were much of a build, so that his clothes were no ill-fit; and he was ridiculously generous, pressing all that he had upon me, and lending me a great gold watch and gold studs that were illicitly gotten, I felt sure.

In the end I had quite a store of clothing; and I waited while he finished his own work that we might go down together to the launch awaiting us. There we found Black, watching men who were putting large bales of goods into the screw steamer, and everywhere there was sign of the break-up of the settlement. The captain merely nodded when I gave him a word, and I thought that he was sore depressed, with scarce energy enough to be irritable. He seemed to doubt the wisdom of the departure even then; and he often hesitated in his walk, looking up to the windows of his home behind him. At the last, when the negro servants had come down the iron stairway, he locked the great door after them; and then he stood and cast his gaze over to the hills and the desolate land, which I believed he had a great kindness for. When he did join us, he gave the word, "Let her go!" with a dogged sort of indifference; and at his command the launch ploughed ahead, and passed through the cañon to the outer basin.

The sun was almost in the horizon then, and the northern lights were playing in the heavens, so that all the water was then alight with the glory of a hundred colours. Now orange, or a lighter golden, or blue as of the Corsican Sea, or flaming scarlet, or emerald green, or all shades of yellow, with the pink and pearl and fainter green as of a colossal opal, the light fell and spread from bright to bright, and crag to crag; and above there were sheets of eruptive flame and great rumblings, and mighty arcs of fire spanning the whole heavens, and gripping them as with the glittering jewelled hand of some monstrous keeper of the skies whose mutterings came to us below. Or the scene changed again, and it was as though elves of the zenith had brought their golden caskets above the firmament, and there had burst them open, so that all the jewels of the light rained upon sea and land, and burnt each other with their own beauty as they fell; and the earth answered them back with her shining face. One of the supreme moments of life, truly, to bathe in this shower of multi-coloured splendour, to follow it in its golden path, where rocks took shape, and snow-forms lived, and the seas danced to its accompanying music, and one stood nearer to the great mysteries while yet farther from the homes of man.

Black watched the aurora as we watched it, but chiefly as it played upon his ship, lying moored in the very centre of the outer basin. They had made a great change in her since I had seen her but two days before; for she was now given bulwarks of white canvas, and her funnel was painted white, while covers hid away the bright points of her deck-houses and her turrets. She had become a white ship; and her transformation had been made with vast skill, so that I felt I should not have known her had I met her on the Atlantic. From her position away from the shaft of the mine, it was evident that she was ready to weigh; and I was reminded grimly of her mission by seeing a streamer of black at her mast-head instead of the Blue Peter. This time, too, there was a faint haze above her funnel, as though coal was being burnt in her furnaces; yet I had no wonder that I did not see steam coming from her, for I knew that she was driven by gas, and was in many ways a ship of mystery.

We boarded her at a ladder amidships, for the most part of her accommodation was contained in a towering deck erection round her funnel. Here there were two stages of cabins with a wide gallery running between them, and protruding so that it was directly above the water. There was, indeed, a companion-way aft of this which led to the cabin I had occupied when a prisoner in the ship, and I found at a

later time that the library of the vessel, with the store-rooms and a number of private cabins, was built in the 'tween decks abaft the funnel. Yet the great saloon I was to use during so many months, the quarters which Black occupied, the doctor's room, the rooms for the engineers, and for certain of the others who were privileged, were all ranged amidships; and I learned that while there was a big fo'castle, it was given over entirely to the niggers, with whom the white men would not serve. These superior fellows, as they thought themselves, had accommodation in the poop, where there was a big cabin with berths all round it; yet with all this, the small part of the whole vessel devoted to quarters was noteworthy, and was designed, I did not doubt, for some purpose which I should learn presently.

These things I did not ascertain, you may be sure, on first boarding the ship. Although they left me to myself upon the high gallery whence I could see all the life on the decks below, they were so busy with the preparation for weighing anchor that no man spoke a word to me. The hands themselves, the moment they were afloat, settled down to work with surprising steadiness. Black upon the bridge now wore a smart uniform with gold buttons and much show of lace; and the self-command of the man, the perfect knowledge of all things nautical which he displayed, and his all-absorbing love of his child, the ship, accounted for much that I had not understood in him before. I found to my amazement that Doctor Osbart acted not only as surgeon to the crew, but also as second officer; "Four-Eyes" being first officer; and the bully, "Roaring John," third. The coarse-mouthed Scotsman who assumed the title of, "meenister" was, they told me, as good a seamen as any of them, and a wonderful gunner, so that he was in charge of the armament, with a big staff of men at his back. Of the engineers I saw nothing on first coming aboard; but later I heard the sound of pumping below, and there came up to the bridge where Black and the others were, a little, thin, wizened, and spectacled man, quite bald, very ragged and black, yet with a head on him that could have stamped him "First-Class" in any assembly of the learned. I thought at the first glance that he was a German, and my surmise was confirmed by the doctor, who remembered me at last, and said—

"Do you see that little fellow?—well, he's the genius of this ship. He's deaf and dumb, and no man has ever heard a word from his lips; but he designed our engines, and he runs them with his three sons. It's almost pitiable to see the man's disregard for anything but that infernal machinery. He never leaves it; it's meat and drink to him. If we make money, he doesn't want it; if we're going for a spell ashore, he won't come, but stays here poking about the wheels. He was the first man in all Europe to see that gas would finally supplant steam for maritime vessels; and Black gave him *carte blanche* to carry out his ideas on this ship. You may be surprised to hear it, but fore and aft in those great cigar-shaped ends of ours we have nothing but gas—three million feet, at a pressure of between two and three atmospheres. Why, man, it's the idea of the century: for every four pounds of coal burnt by an Atlantic liner, we don't burn a pound. We can steam for ten days without lighting a fire; and all the coal we need to go round the world will go in our bunkers. Save for that, and Karl Remy's genius, there wouldn't be a man jack of us with a neck to call his own to-day. Now, we snap our fingers at the best of them; there isn't a cruiser that can live with the thirty knots we can show; and there isn't a line-of-battle ship swimming that could get the better of us while our engines are moving. It's a big claim you think, but wait until you see us in action, then you'll know how much we owe to the little man in rags, but who has one of the clearest brains that ever was put into human being."

I was silent under this revelation, for it came to me that, with all the terrors of the great ship, there was also a scientific side, which marked the presence of a mighty intellect. The doctor saw the impression he had made upon me, and he said—

"To-morrow we will show you more; you shall meet the ragged man——"

"Which is mysel'," said the Scotsman, who had joined us silently, "mysel' that has'na a dud to my back. D'ye ken that when there's ony distribution o' the gudes I get a' the female apparel; which is no justice ava for a meenister, let alone a sea-faring man."

"Never mind, Dick," said the doctor laughing, as I did; "we'll beg a skirt for you the first time we say how-d'y-e-do to a passenger vessel——"

"Hands, heave anchor!" roared Black at that moment; and our conversation stopped suddenly at the cry. Then slowly, as the bell rang out, the great engines began their work, and we swept out to the open sea. Night had fallen, but the aurora still gave her changing light; and as we felt the first oscillations of the rolling breakers, Black took a long look behind him to his Arctic home. There before us was the black, towering, indented coast of Greenland, the bluff headlands of gneiss, the beacons of snow all crimson in the playing colours of the mighty arc; and away beyond them, the vista of the eternal stillness, and the plain of death. A long look it was that the man of iron cast then upon his wild habitation; a look almost prophetic in its sadness, as if he knew that he should look upon it no more. A great farewell of an iron heart, and the breakers sang the "Vale!" as the ship sped onward to her deadly work.

CHAPTER XXI.

TO THE LAND OF MAN.

We dined that night in the saloon upon the deck, a commodious place lighted by electricity, and in every way luxuriously fitted. The walls of it were panelled in white and gold, and were covered with curious designs, old heroes fighting, old gods drawn by lions at their chariots; Bacchantes revelling, Jason seeking the fleece in a golden barque; Orestes fleeing the Furies. The long seats were covered in leather of a deep crimson, and there was a small piano, with many other appointments that were significant. The dinner itself was admirably served, and was partaken of by the deaf-and-dumb engineer, by the doctor, the Scotsman, and myself. We were waited on by a couple of negroes; and when the meats were removed we went above to an exquisitely-furnished little smoking-room, and there drank rich brown coffee and enjoyed some very fine cigars. I was all ears then to learn, if I could, what was the destination of the ship; and I found that Black talked without reserve before me, knowing well that I could do him no injury. He relied mostly on the doctor for advice, and discussed everything with him in the best of tempers.

"My plan is this," he said: "we're short of oil, and Karl here is beginning to get uneasy. I shall knock over a couple of whalers in these seas, and fill the tanks. Then, as they're looking for us in mid-Atlantic, we'll get south of Madeira, and run against two or three of the big ones making for Rio or Buenos Ayres. We shall pick up a good bit of money; and it'll be a month before they get on our course that way, for I mean to let 'em down light when it's not a case of saving our own skin."

The Scotsman gave a deep sigh at this, and said in a melancholy voice—

"Hoot, mon, the deid frightened you."

"You're a liar," continued Black quite quietly, and then continued: "As Europe knows my game, it doesn't matter how often she hears of me. Let her hear, and come agen me, and I'll show my teeth. What we're out for this journey is money, specie, pieces in piles, and we'll get that on the lay of Rio-bound ships better than

in any waters. It'll be quick work, one against the rest of 'em; but I built this ship to fight, and fight she shall—you agree on that, doctor?"

"Of course. The more fighting the men see the less trouble we shall have with them."

"That's what I say—give 'em work to do, and they'll sleep like dogs when it's done; give 'em money and drink, and you've got hogs to drive. Now, let me get through the winter, and I'll run south a spell in hiding, and then make northward with ten thousand pounds a man when the fall comes. But first we'll have a week in Paris, I reckon, and stretch our legs amongst them as is most anxious to shake with us—what do you say, Dick?"

"Man," said the Scotsman deliberately, "if there's nae killing, I misdoubt me o't a' thegither."

"You're a fool," replied the skipper testily, "and if you don't go to bed, I'll kick you there."

The fellow rose at this, and coolly emptied half a tumbler of whisky; but before he could leave "Four-Eyes" came off the bridge and said laconically—

"Whaler on the port-bow."

"Signal 'em to come to, and drop a shot," cried Black rising; and then he called to the Scotsman and gave his orders—

"Stand by the gun!" and with that we all went out to the gallery, and saw by the clear power of the moon a full-rigged ship not a mile from the shore. She was homeward bound, and seemed by her build to be a Dane.

Upon our own deck there was already activity, some of the men getting away the launch, and others putting empty barrels into it before they swung it out over the sea. There was a method and quietness about it all, which showed long habit at the same practice; and when at last the great gun before the funnel boomed out, the fine accuracy of the shooting scarcely caused comment. The shot appeared to drop into the water almost under the whaler's bob-stay, and sent up a cloud of foam and spray, glistening in the moonlight; but the ship answered to it as to a deadly summons; and the tide and wind setting off shore, she went into the breeze easily, and lay to at the first demand. Then Black gave his orders—

"You, John, go aboard and buy their oil up—I'm getting you notes from my chest."

At the word *buy*, the man John seemed astounded.

"Oh, I reckon," he said, "we'll pay 'em hard cash with a clout on the skull, cap'n; come right along, boys, and bring your shootin' irons. Oh, I guess we'll pay 'em, money down, and men a-top of it."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, you lubber!" roared Black; "but what you take you'll pay for, d'ye hear me?—then shut your mouth up and go aboard."

John was not the only man who was struck dumb by the skipper's whim. There were mutterings on the deck below, and Dick, who had come from the conning-tower was bold enough to make remark.

"It's a'most sinfu'," he said, "to be sae free wi' the siller; why man, ye could verra weel buy me a hundred pairs o' breeks wi' the same, and no be wanting it."

But Black was watching the launch, now speeding in the moonlight towards the rolling whaler. I watched it too, remembering how, not many weeks before, I had stood on the deck of my own yacht, and awaited the coming of the same craft with my heart in my mouth. Now the danger was not mine, but I felt for the men who had to face it, since Black's talk about purchase could scarcely soften the native ferocity of those who served him; and I feared that the scene would end in bloodshed.

Happily the surmise was quite incorrect. That which promised a tragedy gave us but a comedy. We saw from the platform that our men were taken aboard the ship, and we watched to see them hoist their barrels after them. But they did not, making no sign of having the oil, although there came shouts and sounds of altercation from the anchored vessel; and we saw the flash of pistols, and dark objects presently in the sea. To the surprise of us all, the launch returned after that; and

when our men came aboard, they presented a shocking spectacle. "Roaring John," was covered from head to feet with a thick, black, oleaginous matter; two of the others had their faces smeared in tar; the rest were like drowned rats, and were chattering until their teeth clashed with the cold. Nor could they for some time, what with their spluttering and their anger, tell us what misfortune had overtaken them.

"The darned empty skunks" gasped John at last—"they haven't got a barrel aboard, not a barrel, I guess; and when I gave 'em play with my tongue, they put me in the waste-tub—oh, I reckon, up to my eyes in it—"

"Do you mean to say," asked Black, "that they've took no whales?"

"Except ourselves, yer honour," said a little Englishman, who was cowering like a drowned rat, "which they throw'd overboard, like the whales in the Scriptures, never a fish."

"Then we've wasted our time!" cried the skipper, stamping his great foot; "and you're lazy varmin to stop so long aboard parleying with 'em. I'm going on; you can settle your scores among you."

He gave the order, "Full steam ahead!" at which the third officer showed the temper of a whipped beast.

"You're going ahead leaving them swimming? Then darn me if I serve," said he. "What? They pitch me in their dirty tub, and you laugh! By thunder! I'll teach you!"

Captain Black watched his anger with a pitying leer; but "Dick the Ranter" and "Four-Eyes" were overcome with laughter, and roared until the ship echoed.

"Houly Moses, it's a fine picture ye are, my beauty," said the mate; "and if o'll be scraping ye down with a shovel, it's yer own fayther wouldn't know ye, so clane ye'll be."

"To the which I would add, man," said Dick, "that if ye'd let yersel' drip into the lubricators you'd be worth siller to us; not to say onything o' the discourse I might verra weel preach on Satan from yer present appearance."

The banter turned the man from his more meaning purpose. He stood gibbering for a moment, while the crowd pressed on him with gibes and jeers; but he had his revenge, after all, for there was a tar-bucket at the foot of the upper-deck ladder, and with this he armed himself. The brush was well-charged and dripping, the tar yet liquid, the Scotsman's face was all-inviting. With a fierce shout the enraged man went to the attack, and painted his lantern-jawed opponent merrily. In less time than I can tell of it, the Ranter dripped from head to foot; the black stuff poured from his hemp-like hair, from his ears, it oozed down his neck, it even ran through to his boots; and when his enemy could no longer wield the brush from fatigue, he emptied the bucket on the man's head as a last triumphant vindication of his strength.

"Now we're a pair!" he said, pausing for breath, and surveying his work as an artist surveys a finished picture; "and I guess you ain't going to take the biscuit in this beauty show."

"Man, I could hae weel dispensed wi' t," sputtered the Scotsman; "but I thank ye for dyeing my breeks. They've been wanting colour since New Year."

The laughter had not yet died away when the men went to their cabins, and we posted the watches before turning in. We were at that time in Lat. 65° N. at a rough calculation, and we passed the Danish settlement of Godthaab early on the next morning, though so far out at sea that I could make nothing of it; while we lost the coast of Greenland altogether before the day had passed, a hazy shower of dust-like snow greeting our coming to the Atlantic and to a perceptibly warmer latitude. During this day, and until we sighted the Shetlands, the small screw tender kept our course, and we exchanged signals with her every morning, her purpose being explained to me by "Four-Eyes," on the fourth morning out, in his child-like phraseology.

"Faith, she's Liverpool bound, and we'll pick her up again south of the Scilly

when she's tidings of 'ships out. Bedad, sir, there's fine time's coming; what wi' the say full av big ones, and we one agen 'em, I'm like to believe as we'll step ashore with our throats cut, ivery man av us, and on the shore av me own country, which sorra a day I left for this job."

"Why did you leave it, 'Four-Eyes'?" I asked cheerfully; and he said—

"'Twas this way, sorr, but it's a long yarn, and ye don't nade more than the p'int av it. When I was priest's bhoy in Tipperary, me and Mike Sullivan had atween us what you gents call a vendeny, and coming out av church—'twas Sunday mornin' five year ago—I met Mike, an' he puts coals av fire on me head. 'Begorra,' says I, 'it's lucky for ye I'm in the grace, but plase God I'll not be to-morrow;' but the spalpeen went to Cork next day, and it wasn't till a year that I run agen him, prepared to do my dooty."

"And you did it, I'll be bound!"

"Sorra a bit; I just fell in with the divil, being an aisy sort av sowl, and he made me as drunk as a gentleman—that's why I'm here, sorr. He shipped me aboard and got five pounds from me, me that meant to tread on his head, the dirty skunk—but it's the way av the world, sorr; help a man that's down, an' the moment the spalpeen's on his fate he'll dance on ye."

"Which is verra true," said Dick the Ranter, who after two days had still tar upon him, and was wrapped in a woman's shawl; "but will ye postpone your th'dly, and go below to the doctor, who's wanting ye to see the gear?"

They had not yet shown me the engines of the nameless ship, and I welcomed the opportunity, grown weary with watching the dull green of the sea, and the monotony of the sky-laden clouds. Dick led the way quickly from the gallery to the lower deck, and thence down an iron ladder to the great engine-room. Here truly was a wondrous sight; the sight of three sets of the most powerful engines that have yet been placed in a battle-ship. Each of them had four cylinders, eighty inches in diameter; and all were driven by the hydrogen from the huge gasometers which our holds formed. The gas itself was made by passing the steam from a comparatively small boiler through a coke and anthracite furnace, the coke combining with the oxygen and leaving pure hydrogen. The huge cylinders drove upwards with a double crank to carry their motion to the screw; and I found that the difficulty of starting and reversing was overcome by an intermediate bevel-wheel gearing and friction clutch, which could throw the motion off the shaft, and allow that instantaneous going astern otherwise impossible in a gas-engine. That day there was a huge fire in the furnace, emitting terrific heat and crackling sparks, for the men were making gas, in view of a run or two off the coast of Ireland. It was more pleasant than I can tell you to watch the entire absorption of the gifted engineer, in the maze of machinery which surrounded him, to paint the paternal pathos of his look as he watched every motion and eyed every bearing. The maker of an empire certainly he was; the man of mind who, for the time, had given these ruffians the kingship of the sea; had made mockery of the opposition of the nations; and, I could not help but reflect as I turned away sick at heart at the sight of so much power, had caused me to be a prisoner, perhaps for life, in that citadel of metal. Yet, he was a genius; and to the end of my days I shall think, as I thought then, of the superb gifts so wasted in their channel, of the masterful intellect devoted only to pillage and plunder.

In such a frame of mind I left the engine-room and mounted to the upper deck, to hear the cry, "Land on the port bow."

It was the coast of Ireland, they told me; and I know not if I have ever had a greater pleasure than that distant view of my own country gave to me. For it was as though I had passed from a dead land to the land of men, from the silent ways of night to the first breaking of the God-sent day.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ROBBERY OF THE "BELLONIC."

OUR view of the distant shore of Ireland was a fleeting one; and we passed thence almost immediately to the open sea, steaming due S.W. for some hours, but at no great pace. It was not until daybreak on the following morning that we reached the track of ocean-bound ships; but our voyage was altogether in favour of Black, for the sun had scarce risen when Doctor Osbart got me from my bed to see what he called my first introduction to business.

"There's the Red Cross Line's *Bellonic* not a mile off on the starboard quarter," cried he exultingly, "and we're going to clear her. Come out, man, and get the finest breakfast you ever tasted."

I dressed anyhow, almost as excited as he was, and stepped on to the gallery, to see a rolling waste of dull-green breakers, and a sky washed with broken thunder-clouds, through which the risen sun was struggling. The wind was keen from the south, and drove a fine rain, which lashed the face as with a whip; while much spray broke upon us and there was moaning of the cowl and the shrouds, and many signs of more wind to come. These atmospheric difficulties troubled no one, however, for all eyes were turned to the north, where, now almost abreast of us, at a distance of half a mile or less, there was the long and magnificent hull of the great liner. She was then in the full sunlight, a fine spectacle; and I could see her bare decks, trodden only by the watch, while a solitary officer paced the bridge. The contrast between her sleepy inactivity and our keen alertness was very marked, for all hands trod our decks, and there was a restlessness and an evident ferocity amongst the little group upon the bridge which marked a purpose brooking no delay.

I had begun to ask myself when the work would be done, for the liner went at a tremendous pace and was rapidly leaving us, when I got my answer with the crash of the great gun forward, and the sight of a shell ploughing the sea fifty yards ahead of the *Bellonic*. The cries of "Well shot, Swearing Dick!" had not died away before the effect of the call was seen upon the great vessel, whose decks were soon dotted with black objects, while three more men appeared on the bridge, and the signal flags ran up, and were answered by us. "Four-Eyes" was at our mast, and interpreted the message to Black, who followed all that was done without betrayal of emotion, but only with the savage anticipation of the predatory instinct.

"Signal to 'em to lie to; if they don't want to go to hell," he said between his teeth, and "Four-Eyes" answered:

"Ay, ay, sorr;" then, as the signal came, "He sez uz he'll say us at blazes afore he hates a knot."

"Give it him for'ard then, and teach him," roared Black; and the shot that answered his command struck the quivering hull not twenty feet from the windlass and you could see the splinters carried fifty feet in the air, while the shrieks of terror came over the sea to us, and were piercing then.

"What's he say now?" asked the Captain, cooler than even at the beginning of the work.

"Says as he'll make it warm for ye at New York, and if ye come aboard, it's on yer own head; an' ye swing fer it—he'll not stop till ye disable him."

"The thick-headed vermin," hissed Black; "give him another, amidships this time."

The second shot made us reel and shiver as she left us; but there was no hit, for we rolled much, and saw the shell burst on the far side of the liner. At this, and at the failure of a second attempt, the Captain lost patience, and gave the order—

"Full steam ahead, and clear the machine guns."

It was almost superb, I admit now, and the excitement of it was then upon me, to feel our great ship quiver at the touch of the bell, and bound forward with waves

of foam and spray running from her decks, and each plate on her straining as though the mighty force of the engines below would rend it from its fellows.

I had not before known the limit of her speed, or what she could do when driven as she then was; and the truth amazed me, while it filled me with a strange exultation. For we, who had dallied heretofore behind the other, sped beyond her as an express train passes the droning goods; and coming about, in a great circle, we descended upon her as a goshawk upon the quarry.

The machine-guns upon our decks were already cleared; the men were stripped, ready for the fray, as tigers for their food. Indeed, before I quite understood the purport of the manœuvre, we were passing the *Bellonic* at a distance of not more than fifty yards; and at that moment it seemed as if all the furies of hell were let loose upon our decks.

Screaming like wild beasts, the men turned the handles of the Maxim guns; the balls rained upon the defenceless liner as hail upon a sheepfold. I heard fierce curses and dull groans; I saw strong men reel and fall their length as death took them; the breeze bore to me the wailing of women, and the sobs of children.

But we had done the foul work in the one passage, for the flag dropped at once upon the liner, and the signal was made to us to come aboard. We had gained a horrid triumph, if such you could call the murders, and it remained but to divide the spoil.

"Lower away the launch, you John!" cried Black, "and take every shilling you can lay hands on. You hear me?—and hang up that skipper for a thin-skinned fool."

"By thunder, I'm yours all along," replied "Roaring John"; and then he sang out, "Hands for the launch!"

"You'd better go as cox," said Osbart to me, "you'll be amused;" and suggested it to Black, who turned upon me a look almost of hate.

"Yes, he shall go," he cried; "if we swing, he shall swing, the preaching lubber! Let him get aboard, or I'll kick him there."

I had loathing at the thought of it, but might as well have put a pistol to my head there and then as to have refused. They bundled me into the launch, and I sat shivering at the prospect of the terrors on the deck; but they would not leave me when they came alongside, and "Roaring John" himself drove me up the ladder which was put out amidships. Seven of us at last stood on the bridge, and were face to face with the captain of the *Bellonic*, and four of his officers.

I have said that I feared the terrors of that deck, but the reality surpassed the conception.

It was a very babel of sounds, of groans, of weeping. The ship's surgeon himself seemed paralysed before the sight of the carnage around him. You looked along the length of the vessel, and it was as though you looked upon the scene of a bloody battle; for there were dead almost in heaps, and wounded screaming, and streams of blood, and fragments of wreckage as though the ship had been under fire for many hours. But above all this terror, I know of nothing which struck me with such fearful sorrow as the sight of a fair young English girl lying by the door of the great saloon, her arms extended, her nut-brown hair soaked in her own blood, while a man knelt over her, and you could see his tears falling upon her dead face, and his ravings were incoherent and almost those of a maniac. At the sight of us he jumped to his feet, and shrieked "Murderers!" so continuously that the echo of his cry rang in my ears that day and for many days.

Meanwhile another scene was passing on the bridge between the man John and the captain of the *Bellonic*.

"What do you want aboard of my ship?" cried the latter; and "Roaring John" answered him with a mocking leer:

"We've come aboard to hang you, to begin on!"

The men with the young officer cocked their revolvers at this, and I said in a mad frenzy which would not brook silence—

"You scoundrel, if you touch another soul here I'll shoot you myself!" for I had

my revolver on me. "Do you make a business of killing children?" I cried again, and pointed to the dead body of the girl-child.

I don't know who was more surprised, the captain of the *Bellonic*, listening, or the man John.

"You cub," he cried; "if you talk to me I'll skin you alive!" but I said quickly—

"Gentlemen, these men want every shilling on this ship. Give it them now and save your lives, for you have no alternative. If you give the money up, you have my word that they won't touch you."

"If there's a God above," exclaimed the young captain, "they shall pay for this day's work with their lives. I band my specie over under this protest; but don't deceive yourselves—half the war-ships in Europe shall follow you within a week."

He turned away, and presently the ruffians with me had lowered money to the value of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds into their launch. The third mate seemed then somewhat cowed by my interference, and though he went round the ship and cried "Bail up!" every time he met a passenger, he did not touch one of them. I remained on the bridge a silent spectator of it all; and when at last we put off again, and the launch was full of the jewels and the money, it seemed that I had passed through a hideous dream.

At the time, I shrank from the ruffians in the boat as from men who were savage fiends and a hundred times assassins; and their brutality of speech and threat fell upon ears that would not hear; nor did their pretence of doing me violence then and there move me one jot. I maintained a stubborn indifference, my pistol still in my hand, my teeth shut in the defiance of them, until we reached the great craft, and joined Black upon the gallery. There, the man John explained that I had stood between him and his purpose of hanging the skipper of the *Bellonic*; indeed, with such warmth and anger, that I though my end had come upon the spot.

"You barking cub," said Black, more quietly than usual, but none the less to be feared for that, "what d'ye mean by interfering with my men and my orders?"

"To save you from yourself," I answered, looking him full in the face; "you've killed children on that ship, if that's news to you!"

He had a spy-glass in his hand, and he raised it as though to strike me; but I continued to look him full in the face, and he remained swaying his body slightly, his arm still above his head. Then, suddenly it dropped at his side, as though paralysed; and he turned away from me.

"Get to your kennel," said he; "and don't leave it till I fetch you."

I was glad to escape, if only for a few moments, from the danger of it; and I went to my cabin in the upper gallery, but not before the angry shouts of the men convinced me that Black had risked much on my behalf for the second time. Even when my own door was locked upon me, such cries as "You're afeared of him!" "Is he going to boss you, skipper?" and other jeers were audible to me; and the uproar lasted for some time, accompanied at last by the sound of blows, and cries as of men whipped. But no one came to me except the negro who brought my meals; and whatever danger there was of a mutiny was averted, as Dr. Osbart told me later in the day, by the appearance of a second passenger ship on the horizon. The report of the single shot, by which we brought her to, shook me in my berth, where I lay thinking of the horrid scenes of the morning; and for some time I scarce dared look from my window, lest they should be repeated. Only after a long silence did I open the port, and see a majestic vessel, not a hundred yards from us, with our launch at her side; and I could make out the forms of our men walking amongst the passengers and robbing them.

The details of this attack Osbart told me with keen relish when he came in to smoke a cigar with me after my dinner.

"We stripped them without killing a man," said he with hilarious satisfaction, "and took fifty thousand. Black's pleased; for, to tell you the truth, there's an ugly spirit aboard amongst the men, and you upset them altogether this morning. I never saw another who could have said what you said to the skipper and have lived;

but you mustn't show on deck for a day or two—they'd murder you to pass time ; and, as it is, we've had to post a man at your door, or I doubt if you'd save your skin in here."

"You seem to be making a paying cruise," I said sarcastically.

"Yes ; and it's funny, for the sea is swarming with war vermin. Don't you feel the pace we're going now ? I expect we're showing our heels to one of them, and shall show them a good many times between this and the first of next month, though Karl below is grumbling about the oil again : you want gallons of it with gas-engines. If we don't pick up the tender to-morrow, it's a bad look-out."

He did not come to me again for three days, but I saw from my port early the following morning that the tender was with us ; and I concluded regretfully that the difficulty of the oil was overcome. On the second day after the robbery of the *Bellonic*, we stopped a third ship ; though I saw nothing of it, as all the fighting was on the starboard side, and my cabin was to port ; but there was a sharp fight on the third morning with a Cape-bound vessel, and again towards the afternoon with one of the North-German Lloyd boats homeward bound to Bremerhaven : as before, Osbart, coming to my rooms, delighted to give me the details of the captures ; and that night he was unusually frivolous.

"Poor business to-day," he said, throwing himself into a lounge and lighting a cigar ; "not an ounce of specie, and no jewellery to mention—and there was no killing, so don't put on that face of yours. Why, my dear boy, it was a perfect farce ! I, myself, argued for twenty minutes with an old woman, who sat mewling like a cat on her box and when I got her off it, thinking she had a thousand in diamonds, it was full of baby linen. And I'll tell you a better thing. An old Dutch Jew threw a twopenny-halfpenny bundle into the sea, and then he was so sick with himself that he went in after it. We hooked him out by the breeches with a boat-hook ; but I believe he wished himself dead with the bundle. As for 'Four Eyes,' he took what he thought was five hundred in notes from a card-player, but they're bad, dear boy, bad—every one of them."

"You don't seem very depressed about it," said I.

"Don't I ?" replied he. "Well, things aren't all they should be. The tender we sent to Liverpool came out in a hurry, as they began to watch her, with a mere bucketful of oil aboard. We must get oil from somewhere or we shall all swing as sure as we're doing twenty-eight knots now. That's what I've come to tell you about to-night. The skipper can't stand it any more, and is going to run to England himself, and see what those mighty smart naval people of yours are doing. He'll take you with him, for it would be as good as signing your death-warrant to leave you here. Don't count upon it, though, for we shan't let you out of our sight, and you've got to swear a pretty big oath not to give us away before you set foot on the tender."

I was overjoyed at his saying, but I feared to let him see it, and asked with nonchalance—"How do you pick up this ship again ?"

"Oh, we fix a position," he replied, "and they'll keep it every day at mid-day after ten days. Meanwhile we're running north out of the track of the cruisers."

"I can't quite understand why the skipper takes me with him this time," I remarked, endeavouring to draw him, but he answered—

"No more can I ; between ourselves, he's been half daft ever since you came aboard. Do you know that the man's more fond of you, in his way, than of any living thing ? I know it. I'm the only man on the ship who does know it, and why it is I can't tell you. I didn't think he was capable of a human feeling."

"It's very good of him to waste so much affection on me," said I, meaning to be derisive, but Osbart checked me.

"Don't laugh," he exclaimed ; "you owe your life to him alone."

CHAPTER XXIII.

I GO TO LONDON.

It was a week after this conversation that Captain Black, Dr. Osbart, and myself entered the 7.30 train from Ramsgate; leaving in the outer harbour of that still quaint town the screw tender, now disguised, with the man John and eight of the most turbulent among the crew of the nameless ship aboard her. We had come without hindrance through the crowded waters of the Channel; and, styling ourselves a Norwegian whaler in ballast, had gained the difficult harbour without arousing suspicion. At the first, Black had thought to leave me on the steamer; but I, who had an insatiable longing to set foot ashore again, gave him solemn word that I would not seek to quit him, that I would not in any way betray him while the truce lasted, and that I would return, wherever I was, to the tender in the harbour at the end of a week. He concluded the conditions with the simple words, "I'm a big fool, but you can come." The others opened their eyes and tapped their foreheads, for they believed him to be a maniac.

I will not pause to tell you my own thoughts when I set foot on shore again. So great was my amazement at it all that I went some time without collecting myself to see that the invisible hand of God, which had led me all through, was leading me again—even, as I hoped, to the consummation of it. Fearless in this new thought, I sat in the corner of the first-class carriage reserved for us in such a state of exultation and of hope as few men can have known. Before me were the downs of Kent, the open face of an English landscape, the orchard-bound homesteads, the verdurous pasture-land. The hedges were bedecked with their late autumn flowers; the teams and smock-frocked men were going home to the gabled houses, and the warm-lit cottages. There was odour of the harvest yet in the air, and the distant chiming of bells from the Gothic tower which rose above the hamlet and the knoll of green. Each little town we passed cast from its windows bright rays upon the tremulous twilight; a great bar of fiery redness cut the lower black of the coming night, showing me in shadow the rising of land towards Chatham and towards London. Yet it was the peace of the scene that came to me with the greatest power; the many tokens of home—above all, the thought "I am in England." I could not help but carry my memory at this time to the last occasion when, with Roderick and Mary, I had come to London in the very hope of getting tidings of this man who now sat with me in a Kent-Coast express. Where were the others then—the girl who had been as a sister to me, and the man as a brother; how far had the fear of my death made sad that childish face which had known such little sadness in its sixteen years of life? It was odd to think that Mary might be then returned to London, and that I, whom perchance she thought dead, was near to her, and yet, in a sense, more cut off from her than in the grave itself. And Black, whom all the Governments were pursuing so lustily, was at my side smoking a great cigar, apparently oblivious to all sense of danger or of hazard. Life has many contrasts, but it never had a stranger than that, I feel sure.

It was after ten o'clock that the ride terminated; and, following Black and Osbart into a closed carriage that awaited us, I was driven from the station. I should say that we drove for fifteen minutes or more, staying at last before a house in a narrow *cul-de-sac*, where we went upstairs to a suite of rooms reserved for us. After an excellent supper Osbart left us, but Black took me to a double-bedded room, saying that he could not let me out of his sight, and that I must share the sleeping-place with him.

"Boy, if you make one attempt to play me false," said he, "I'll blow your brains out, though you were my own son."

Then he went to bed at once in a morose and foreboding mood, and I followed his example quickly.

On the next morning Black quitted the house at an early hour after breakfast, but he locked the door of the room upon Osbart and myself. "Not," as he said, "because I can't take your word, but because I don't want anyone fooling in here." He returned in the evening, at seven o'clock, and found me as he had left me, reading a later novel of Paul Bourget's; for Osbart had slept all the afternoon, and was always complaining when on shore.

The view from the window upon a balcony of lead and the back windows of near houses was not inviting, and my bond had held me back from all idle thoughts of eluding him. Life in London under such conditions was little preferable to life on the ship, and I had no heart to hear Black's stories of things doing in town; or to examine the many purchases of miniatures and quaint old jewels, which he had laid on the dinner-table.

The day following was Thursday. I shall always remember it, for I regard it as one of the most memorable days in my life. Black went out as usual early in the morning; his object being, as on the preceding day, to find out, if he could, what the Admiralty were doing in view of the robbery of the *Bellonic*; and Osbart, refusing to get up to breakfast, lay in bed reading the morning papers. We had been left thus about the space of an hour when there came a telegram for the doctor, who read it with a fierce exclamation.

"The Captain wants me urgently," said he, "and there's nothing to do but to leave you here. We are trusting absolutely to you, now; but be quite sure, if you make half a move to betray us, it will be the last you will ever make. I may return here in ten minutes. You must put up with the indignity of being locked in; and, dear boy, don't trouble yourself to look for sympathy in this place, for the man who owns this house is one of us, and, if you call out, you'll get a rap on the head pretty quickly."

He went out jauntily, and I watched him, little thinking that I should never see him again. When he was gone I sat in the great armchair, pulling it to the window, and taking up my book. The sensation of being alone in the centre of London, and unable by my oath to make the slightest attempt to help myself, was most curious; yet with it all I could not but think that I had touched the culminating point, and was near to the ending of it for good or for ill. From the window of my room I could hear the hum of town, the rumbling of 'buses, and the subdued roar of London awake. I could even see people in the houses at the other side of the leads, and it occurred to me, What if I open that casement and call for help? I had given a pledge, it is true; but should a pledge bind under such conditions? The sanctity of an oath is a fine thing for theological subtlety. I had no such subtlety. I knew that the argument in favour of wrong is pleasing to the mental palate; and I put it from me, believing that the breaking of my bond would put me upon the immoral plane of the men to whom it had been given.

I was in the very throes of such a mental struggle when the strange event of the day happened. I chanced to look up from the book I had been trying to read, and I saw a remarkable object upon the leads outside my window. It was the figure of a man with a collapsible neck, a wonderful neck, which expanded appallingly, and again was withdrawn into a narrow and herring-like chest. The fellow might have been thirty years of age; he might have been fifty; there was no hair on his face, no colour in his hollow cheeks; only a nervous movement of the bony fingers, and that awful craning of the collapsible neck. I saw in a moment that he was looking into my room; and presently, when he had given me innumerable nods and winks, he took a knife from his pocket, and opened the catch, stepping into the chamber with the nimble foot of a goat upon a crag-path. Then he drew a chair up to mine, and, making more signs and inexplicable motions of the eye, he slapped me upon the knee, and said—

"In the name of the law!"

This was uttered with such ridiculous levity that I laughed at him.

"Yes," he went on, unmoved, "I take you by surprise; but business, Mr. Mark

Strong," and he became very serious, while his neck went out like a yard-measure and he cast a quick glance round the room.

"Business," he said, when he had satisfied himself that we were alone, "and in two words. In the first place I have wired to your friend, Mr. Roderick Stewart, and I expect him from Portsmouth in a couple of hours; in the second, your other friend, the doctor, is under lock and key, on the trifling charge of murder in the Midlands, to begin with. When we have Captain Black, the little party will be complete."

I looked at him, voiceless from the surprise of it. The magical neck was absorbed in the chest again, and he went on—

"I needn't tell you who I am; but there's my card. We have six men in the street outside, and another half-dozen watching the leads here. You will be sensible enough to follow my instructions absolutely. Black, we know, leaves the country to-night in his steamer—yesterday at Ramsgate; to-day we do not know where. The probability is that he will come to fetch you at seven o'clock—I have frightened it all out of the people downstairs—if he does, you will go with him. Otherwise, he's pretty sure to send someone for you, and, as you at the moment are our sole link between that unmitigated scoundrel and his arrest, I ask you to risk one step more, and return at any rate as far as the coast, that we may follow him for the last time. You'll do that for us?"

I looked at his card, whereon was the inscription, "Detective-Inspector King, Scotland Yard;" and I said at once—

"I shall not only go to the coast, but to his tender, for I've given my word. What you may do in the meantime is not my affair; but——"

"Yes," he said eagerly, craning his neck again, "'for God's sake keep your eye on me,' that's what you were going to say. Well, we shall do it. We owe it to you that we've got any clue to the man, and you're not likely to lose anything from the Government by what you've done."

"I suppose he's made a sensation?" I asked, in simplicity, and he looked as a man who has yesterday's news.

"Sensation! There's been no such stir since the French war. There isn't another subject talked of in any house in Europe—but, read that; and, whatever you do, don't make a sign until we give you the cue. It's not safe for me to stay here; he may return any minute. I wish you luck of it; and it's ten thousand in my pocket, any way!"

Detective-Inspector King went as he had come, craning his neck and passing noiselessly over the leads; but he left me a newspaper, wherein there was column after column concerning the robbery of the *Bellonic*, and a dish worthy of all journalistic sensation-mongering. I read this with avidity; with sharp appetite for the extraordinary hope which had come so curiously into my life. At last, the police were on the trail of Captain Black; yet I saw at once that, lacking my help, he would elude them. It was strange that, after all, I, who had seemed to fail so hopelessly in my enterprise, should at last bring this giant in crime to justice. For, if he had not burdened himself with me, he would then have left in the tender, and, once on the nameless ship, would have defied the world. But now they watched him; and from the solitude of my imprisonment I seemed to be lifted in a moment to a joyous state of expectation and excitement.

It was then about three o'clock in the afternoon. I heard the hour from a neighbouring church; and I recalled the detective's words, "I have telegraphed for your friend, Roderick." If his anticipations were correct, I should see the one man I had the greatest love for within an hour. Yet, on recollection, I would have had it otherwise. If once I looked on Mary's face again, I knew that the task would be almost beyond my strength; and as it happened, it was well I had not this burden to bear in the last hours of the great struggle. For four o'clock struck, and five, and no one came; and it was half-past six when at last a man unlocked the door of my room and entered. He was one of Black's negroes.

"Sar will come quick," said he, "and leave his luggage. The master waits"

He gave me no time for any explanations, but took me by the arm, and, passing from the house by a back door, he went some way down a narrow street, and turned into Piccadilly. There a cab waited for us, and we drove away, but not before one who stood on the pavement, had made a slight signal to me, and called another cab.

In him I recognised Detective-Inspector King, and I knew that we were followed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SHADOW ON THE SEA.

WE drove rapidly, passing the Criterion, so into the Strand, and along the Thames Embankment. Thence, we went through Queen Victoria Street, past the Mansion House, and to Fenchurch Street Station, where we took a train for Tilbury.

The journey was accomplished in something under an hour; and when we alighted and got upon the bank of the river, I saw a steam-launch with the man John in the bows of her. I thought it strange that there was no sign of any watchers at this place; but I entered the launch without a word, and we started immediately, going at a great pace towards Sheerness; and reached the Nore after some buffet with the seas in the open. At this point we sighted the tender, and went aboard her, while they hauled up the launch, when we made full speed towards the North Foreland.

It was then quite dark, with a stiff breeze blowing right abaft. The night, a moonless and very black one, favoured us altogether for the run which, I did not doubt, we had to make against some Government vessel that would follow us. But I found to my surprise that the men on the ship knew nothing of the dangerous position in which they were, and worked with a calm disregard to the blackness of the night, and to the hazard of the moment. Black I did not meet, for they put me into a cabin aft, of which I was the sole occupant; and, being ordered by the man John, who was half-drunk and very threatening, to get below, I turned in shortly after coming aboard, and lay down to reckon with the strange probabilities of the hour.

One thing was very evident. Black had made a colossal mistake, from his point of view, in setting foot in England; but the crowning blunder of his life was that fatal act of folly by which he had sought to shield me from the men. How long the Government had been watching for him, or for tidings of me, I could not tell, but it must have been since Roderick had reached New York, and had told all he knew of the ship of mystery and of her owner.

Now the object of letting Black reach his vessel again was as clear as daylight; it was not so much the man as his ship which they wished to take, and, by following him to the Atlantic, they were giving him rope to hang himself.

But were we followed? I had seen nothing to lead me to that conclusion as I came down the Thames; and now, favoured by an intensely dark night, we promised, if nothing should intervene, to gain the Atlantic in two days, and to be aboard that strange citadel which was our stronghold against the nations.

This thought troubled me very much, so much that sleep was out of the question, and I went above again, undeterred by the probability of a difference with the men. The night was somewhat clearer when I reached the poop, and I could make out the fine flood of light that came from the North Foreland; while it was evident that we had taken the outer passage and should pass on the French side of the Goodwins. There were no men aft as I took my stand by the second wheel, but I heard the bawl of the watch forward, and a man who wore oilskins was pacing the bridge. I was able, therefore, to get a good notion of all things about us; and when the moon showed later, the Channel seemed full of ships. Away towards the Foreland I made out a fleet of French luggers standing in close to shore; there were two or three colliers returning to the Thames on our port bow, and some English smacks lying to right ahead of us, the moon showing them brightly in a lake of light, their men busy at the nets, or huddled at the tiller as the smacks rolled to a choppy sea. But there was no sign of any war-ship pursuing; no indication whatever that the tender, then steaming at thirteen knots towards Dover, was watched or observed by any living being.

I had just satisfied myself of this, and had become depressed accordingly, when I heard a step behind me. I turned round quickly, to find that the man John had come up to the poop. He was in his oilskins, for there was some sea shipped for'ard, and he greeted me with a savage ferocity which was meant to be pleasant.

"Keeping a watch on your own hook, my fine gentleman, eh?" said he; "and after my orders for you to be abed—that's pretty discipline, I reckon."

I made no sort of answer, but turned my back on him, and continued to watch the twinkling lights of Deal. This appeared to irritate him, for he put his hand on my shoulder roughly, and hissed savagely—

"Oh, I guess; you've got your fine coat, ain't you, and your pretty airs. Darn me if I don't take you down a peg, skipper or no skipper!"

His great hand was almost on my throat, and he shook me with fearful grip, so that I hit him with my right hand just below his heart, and bent him double like a reed. His terrible gasps for breath were so alarming that I thought at first he would never recover his wind; but when he did he drew his knife, and raised his arm to take aim at my throat. It is probable that my life had been ended there and then had not another watched the scene and suddenly clutched the extended wrist. Captain Black had come to us with noiseless step; and he gave me then my first knowledge of his prodigious physical strength, for he held John's arm as in a vice, and, giving the ruffian's wrist a peculiar turn, he sent the knife flying in the air, and it stuck quivering in the deck twenty feet from where we stood.

"You long-jawed bully, what d'ye mean by that?" cried the skipper, white with anger; and then he twisted the fellow's arm until I thought he would have broken it. Nor did he let him go until he had kicked him the length of the poop, and tumbled him, torn and bleeding, upon the main hatch below.

"Lay your finger on the boy again, and I'll give you six dozen," he said quietly; and then he came to my side, and he stood for a long while leaning on the bulwarks and gazing over towards the receding shore. He spoke to me at last, but in a more gentle tone than I had ever heard from him—indeed, there was almost kindness in his voice.

"Do you make out anything of a big ship yonder?" he asked, pointing almost abaft.

"I see nothing but the hull of a collier!" said I.

"Then it's my sight that's plaguing me again," and he continued to look as though he had some great purpose in satisfying himself, while from the fore-castle there came shouts of laughter and singing. When he heard this he spoke again, but almost to himself.

"Shout away, you scum," he muttered; "shout while you can. It'll be a different tune to-morrow."

I was leaning then on the bulwarks almost at his side, and presently he addressed himself directly to me, and earnestly.

"We had a narrow shave to-night. It's put me out to leave the doctor, for he was the best of them—one of the only men that I could reckon on. If it hadn't been for him and the Irishman, this lot would have swung long ago—maybe they'll swing now. The hounds have got the scent; and, God knows, they will follow it! It's lucky for some of them that I had twenty pairs of eyes open for me in London, and knew the Government's game in time to get this tender out of Ramsgate; but you mark me, boy, there's trouble coming, and thick. I've gone out without a gallon of oil again, and by-and-by we're going to run for our necks, every man of us."

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"What makes me think that?—why, my senses. They'll follow us from some port here, as sure as the wind's rising; maybe they'll let us get aboard the ship, and then that'll be the beginning of it. But if we only hold out with the oil, theA let 'em take care of themselves——"

"And if not?"

He shrugged his shoulders and was silent; but anon he asked again what I thought of a long, rakish-looking steamer lying some miles away on the starboard quarter, and when I had satisfied him he said—

"Come downstairs and get some wine into you, boy;" and I went below to his small and not very elegant cabin, where he put champagne and glasses on the table.

"Let's drink against the thirst we'll have to-morrow," cried he, getting quite jovial, and pouring the Pommery down his throat as though it had been beer. "This is an occasion such as we shan't often know—the old ship against Europe, and one man against the lot of them! Why, lad, if it wasn't for the thought of the oil, I'd get up and dance. The lubbers could no more lay a finger on me, given fair fight, than they could touch the moon. You see, it's just the oil that Karl's feared all along; drive by gas, and you want twenty times the grease in your cylinders that you'll ever need in a steam-ship. If there hadn't been that break-up north, we'd never have been in this hole; but that's one of the risks of a game like this, and I'll play my hand out."

He went on to talk of many other things, but as he did not speak of his own past, or of the ship, I began to nod with sleep; and presently I found him covering me up with a rug and turning out the lamp. I was dead worn-out then, and must have slept twelve hours at the least, for it was afternoon when I awoke, and the sun streamed in through the skylight upon a table whereon dinner was set. But Black was not in the cabin, and I went above to him on the bridge, which he paced with a restless step and a betraying haste. There was no land then to be seen; but the clear play of sparkling waves shone away to the horizon over a tumbling sea, upon which were a few ships. Upon one of these he constantly turned his glass; she was a long screw steamer, showing two funnels and three masts, away some miles on the port quarter, and I saw at once that from this ship the Captain got all his fear.

"Do you make her out?" he said in a big whisper directly I came up to him, and then, hushing me, he added—"Keep your tongue still, and say nothing. That's a British cruiser in passenger paint. She's come out from Southampton."

This was about the very best bit of news he could have given me; but I did not let him see that I thought so, for I had eyes only for the ship in our wake. She was a long boat of the *Northumberland* class; but there was nothing whatever about her to betray her disguise, since she had all the look of an Orient, or a P. and O. liner, and was too far away from us to permit a reading of her flag. The men evidently had not seen her, or took no notice of her if they had; but John upon the bridge followed the movements of Black with curiosity, and once or twice turned his own glass on the black hull just visible above the horizon. He had forgotten the episode of the previous night—when, undoubtedly, he was full of drink—and was almost as troubled as the skipper.

"What's he up to?" he asked me in a whisper, as Black kept turning his glass towards the hull of the other ship. "Did he get any liquor in him last night? I never saw him this way before."

And again, after a pause—

"Have you got any eyes for that ship? What's he fixing her like that for? She's no more than an Orient boat by her jib, and, if she lays on her course we'll make it warm for her outside."

Black heard his last words, and turned round upon him savagely—

"Yes," he said, "it'll be warm enough out there for them as lives as well as for the dead. Ring down for more firing; what's the lubber at?—he's not giving her thirteen knots."

By-and-by all the crew began to observe Black's anxiety and to crowd to the starboard side; but he told them nothing, although he never left the bridge, and cursed fiercely whenever the speed of the tender slackened at all. It was somewhat perplexing to me to observe that, while the great ship was undoubtedly following us, she did not gain a yard upon us. During the whole of that long afternoon, and through the watches of that early night, when I remained upon the bridge with Black, we kept our relative distances; but, do all we could, the other would not be shaken off; and when, after a few hours' sleep, I came on deck at the dawn of the second day, she was still on our quarter, following like the vulture follows the diving man whose hours are numbered.

"There's no humbug about her game," cried Black, whose face was lined with the furrows of anxiety and pale with long watching; "she means to take us on the open sea, and she's welcome to the course. If I don't riddle her like a sieve, stretch me!"

This strange pursuit lasted three days and into the third night; when I was awakened from a snatch of sleep by the firing of a gun above my head. I dressed hurriedly and got on deck, where my eyes were almost blinded by a great volume of light which spread over the sea from a point some two miles away on our starboard bow. We had been in the Atlantic then for twenty-four hours, and I did not doubt for a moment that we had reached the nameless ship. Had there been any uncertainty, the wild joy of the men would have banished it. From windlass to wheel our decks presented a scene of wild excitement. Above all the shouting, the raucous laughter, and the threats against the cruiser—whose lights showed then less than a mile away—I heard the voice of Black, singing: "Hands, stand by to lower boats!" and the yelping of "Roaring John." It seemed at that moment that we should gain the impregnable citadel without suffering one shot, and while I should have been happier if the attack had been upon the tender, and my chances of gaining the Government ship thus more sure, I was in a measure carried away by the excitement of the position, and I verily believe that I cheered with the others.

At that moment the cruiser showed her teeth. Suddenly there was a rush of flame from her bows, and a shell hissed above us—the first sign of her attempt to stop us joining our own ship. The poor shooting excited only the derision of the men, who set up their wild "halloas!" at it; and again, when a second shot struck the aft mast and shivered it, they were provoked to boisterous merriment. But we could make no reply, and those on the nameless ship could not fire, for we lay right between them and the other.

"Ilands, lower boats!" yelled Black at this moment, and then, leaving no more than ten or fifteen men in the steamer, he led the way to the launch.

We were now no more than a quarter of a mile from safety, but the run was full of peril, and, as the launch stood out, the nameless ship of a sudden shut off her light, if possible to shield us in the dark. But the pursuer instantly flooded us with her own arc, and, following it with quick shots, she hit the jolly-boat at the third. Of the eight men there, only two rose when the hull had disappeared.

"Fire away, by thunder!" cried Black, shaking his fist, and mad with passion; "and get your hands in: you'll want all the bark you've got just now."

But we had hauled the men aboard as he spoke, and, though two shells foamed in the sea and wetted us to the skin in the passage, we were at the ladder of the nameless ship without other harm, and with fierce shouts the men gained the decks.

For them it was a glorious moment. They had weathered the perils of a city,

and stood where they could best face the crisis of the pursuit. It was a spectacle to move the most stolid apathy: the sight of a couple of hundred demoniacal figures lighted by the great white wave of light from the enemy's ship, their faces upturned as they waited Black's orders, their hands flourishing knives and cutlasses, their hunger for the contest betrayed in every gesture. I stood upon the gallery high above the seas, and looked down upon the motley company, or along the space of the hazy arc to the other vessel, and I asked myself again and again, What if we shall win—what if this desperate adventurer shall again outwit those who have coped with him, and hold his mastery of the sea?

Nor did it seem so improbable that he would. Those upon the Government cruiser betrayed their uneasiness every moment by casting the beams of their searchlight on every point of the horizon; but their signal was unanswered, no assuring rays shone out in the distant blackness of the night. We two were alone upon the Atlantic, there to fight the duel of the nations; and I confess that in the unparalleled excitement of the moment I rejoiced that it was so; I hoped, even, that the nameless ship would carry the hour, so much had she fascinated me, so astounding were her achievements.

This truly was the critical moment in Black's career. He stepped on the bridge to find Karl wringing his hands, and "Four-Eyes" was no less uneasy.

"Faith, sorr," said he, as soon as we had come aboard, "it's bad times intirely if ye've no oil—we've been working two engines for three days, and we'll be sore put to ut to kape the third going, if ye can't mend us."

Karl emphasised the words with stamps and tears and frantic gesticulation—not lost upon Black, who advanced to the front of the bridge, and called for silence in a voice that would have split a berg. A deathlike stillness succeeded; you could hear the wash of the waves and the moaning of the wind: two hundred upturned faces shone ghastly white under the spreading beams which the cruiser's lantern cast upon them.

"Boys," cried Black, "yonder's a Government ship. You know me, that I don't run after war-scum every day, for that's not my business. But we're short of oil, and the cylinders are heating. If we don't get it in twenty-four hours, there'll be devil's work, and we shan't do it. Boys, it's swing or take that ship and the oil aboard her—which'll you have?"

There was no doubt about their answer—there could be none. In one way it was almost as if the cruiser herself gave reply, for there was the roar of a great gun when Black had finished speaking, and a shot hissed from above our poop and burst in the seas beyond us. A mighty shout followed, but was converted instantly into a cry of warning, as the forward hands sang out—

"Look out aft—the torpedo!" and other hands took up the cry, yelling "The torpedo! The torpedo!"

The tiny line of foam was just visible for a second in the way of the light; but, the moment the cruiser had shot it from her tube, she extinguished her arc, leaving us to light the waters with our own. There was no difficulty whatever in following the line of the deadly message, and for a moment every heart, I doubt not, almost stood still.

"Full speed astern!" roared Black, forgetting himself, but instantly ringing the bell, and the nameless ship moved backwards, faster and yet faster. But the black death-bearer followed her, as a shark follows a death-ship; we seemed even to have backed into its course—it came on as though to strike us full amidships.

The excitement was almost more than I could bear; I turned away, waiting for the tremendous concussion; I heard awful curses from the men, the cowardly shouting of "Roaring John," the blasphemies of "Dick the Ranter." I knew that Black alone was calm; and at the last I fixed my eyes upon him when the head of the torpedo's foam was not thirty yards away from us. In that supreme moment the power of the man rose to a great height. He grasped the situation with the calmness of one thinking in bed; and waiting motionless for some seconds, which were seconds almost of agony to the rest of us, he cried of a sudden—

"Hard a-starboard !" and the helm went over with a run.

The movement was altogether superb. The great ship swung round with a majestic sweep, and as we waited breathlessly, the torpedo passed right under our bow, missing the ram by a hair's-breadth. The reaction was nigh intolerable ; the men waited for some seconds silent as the voiceless ; then their cheers rang away over the seas in a great volume of sound, which must have re-echoed down in the caverns of the Atlantic.

"You, Dick," ordered Black, "return the lubbers that, or I'll whip you ;" and Dick, who had got his wits back, replied—

"Skipper, if I dinna dive into their internals, gie me sax dozen."

"Hands to quarters," continued the skipper ; "let no man show himself till I call, then him as doesn't fight for all he's worth, let him prepare to swing."

With this there fell a great busyness, the men going, some to the turrets, some to the magazines below.

Black had not noticed me during the episode of the torpedo, but he turned round now, and, seeing that I stood near him, he beckoned me into the conning-tower with him. It was a chamber lined with steel with a small glass for the look-out, and electric knobs which allowed communication with the engine-rooms, the wheel, the turrets, and the magazines. From that pinnacle of metal you could navigate the ship, and there Black fought the battle of that night and of the days following. And as I stood at his side I learned from his running comments much of the course of the fight.

"Boy," he said, "what I'm worth I'm going to show this night ; and, as your eyes are younger than mine, I'm going to borrow the loan of them. That hen-coop yonder with the Government flag on her isn't far from company, you may be pretty sure. She's help near, and from that help I'm going to cut her off, and quick. Take your stand here by me, and watch the seas while I manage the light."

He had his hand upon a little tap which enabled him to throw the arc upon every point of the horizon, and, as the light travelled, he asked me—

"Do you make out anything? Is there more of 'em at her heels?"

"Nothing that I can see ; she seems alone."

"Then God help her, though we're only running two engines. Now watch the shot."

The focus was then upon the cruiser, whose own light kept playing upon the horizon as though searching for a convoy she awaited. But when the conning-tower shook with the thunder of our fore gun, the other reeled, and her arc light went out with a great flash.

"That's a hit," I exclaimed, with ridiculous want of control ; "I believe you've struck her abaft the funnel. Yes, I can see the list on her ; you've hit her clean."

His face never moved at the intelligence, but he rang the order "Hard to port !" and we weathered round, showing our aft turret to the enemy, whose bark for the moment was stilled.

"Watch again," said Black as he rang to the turret chamber, and the aft gun roared ; but I could not see that the shot struck, and I told him so.

"I'll give that parson a dozen if he does that again," he remarked, unmoved by the crash of a shot which struck us right under our turret. Then he took a cigar and spoke between his teeth when he had lighted it—

"There's twelve inches of steel there," he said with a laugh ; "let 'em knock on it and welcome. Don't you smoke?—I always do ; it keeps my head clear."

Two more shots, one right above the engine-room and the second at the ram, answered his levity.

"Come on, you devils !" he blurted out with glee. "Come in and dance, by thunder, while I play ye the tune ! Now hearken to it."

We came up again, and fired at the cruiser, hitting her right under the funnel, and a second time near her fore gun, so that you could see her reel and shiver even under the rays of the search-light. Nor did she answer our firing, but rolled to the swell apparently out of action. All this I could see, and I answered the skipper's hurried and anxious questions as every fresh movement was visible

"What's she doing, eh?" he asked. "Did that stop her? Is she coaling up, or does she signal? Lord, if I had the oil I'd sweep the sea from New York to Queenstown. What is it, boy?—why don't you answer me?"

"You don't give me time; but I can see now. She's coaling up and there are men forward working with oars."

"Do you say that?" he said, pushing me away from the glass. "Do you say that she's coaling? By thunder, you're right! We'll have her oil yet; and then let them as come after me look to themselves!"

As he said the last word he stepped from the conning-tower on to the bridge, and I followed him.

There, at the distance of a third of a mile away on the starboard bow, was the crippled cruiser, helpless by her look; and our light fell full upon her, showing men in great activity upon her decks, and others running forward as though there were danger also in the fo'castle. The night around us was very dark, and the huge, heaving swell shone black as pitch in mountains and cavities below the gallery. We two were alone there upon the ocean, finishing that terrible duel—if, indeed, the end had not come, as I thought from the silence of the other.

"Skipper, are you going aboard her now?" asked the man "Roaring John," who came to us on the bridge. "She's done by her looks, and you'll get no oil if ye delay. Karl there, he ain't as comfortable as if he were in his bed."

The little German was very far from it. He was almost desperate when minute by minute his stock of oil grew less; and he ran from one to the other, as though we had grease in our pockets, and could give it to him.

Black took due notice, but did not lose his calm. His cigar was now glowing red, and he took it often from his mouth, looking at the lighted end of it as a man does who is thinking quickly.

"You're quite sure she's done, John?" he asked, turning to the big man.

"She's done, I guess, or why don't she spit? If she's got another kick in her, send me to the devil!"

The words had scarce left his lips when the cruiser's aft guns thundered out almost together, and one shell passed through the very centre of our group. It cut the man John in half as he might have been cut by a sword, and his blood and flesh splashed us, while the other half of him stood up like a bust upon the deck, and during one horrible moment his arms moved wildly, and there was a horrid quivering of the muscles of his face. The second shot struck the roof of the turret obliquely, and glanced from it into the sea. The destruction seemed to move Black no more than a rain shower. He simply cried: "All hands to cover; I'm going to give 'em a taste of the machine-guns;" and we re-entered the conning-tower. Then, as we began to move again, I swept the horizon with our light; but this time, far away over the black waste of water, the signal was answered.

"Number two!" said Black quite calmly, when I told him, "and this time a battle-ship. Well, boy, if we don't take that oil yonder in ten minutes you may say your prayers."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DUMB MAN SPEAKS.

HE put up the helm as he spoke, and brought our head round so that we were in a position to have rammed the cruiser had we chosen. This was not Black's object. He desired first to cripple her completely, then to finish her with the Maxim guns.

"Now, let's see what that Scotsman's worth," he cried, as he laid down his cigar, and spoke through one of the tubes. Almost with his words the tower shook with the thunder, the twenty-nine ton gun in the fore turret belched forth flame, and the hissing shell struck the steamer over her very magazine. We waited for a response, but none came. She had received the shot, as it proved, right on her great gun; and the weapon lay shivered and useless, cast quite free from its carriage, while dead men were around it in heaps.

"Dick's earned his dinner," said Black, taking up his cigar again, as he rang twice, and the men rushed to the small guns, and prepared to get them into action. "Well give 'em a little hail this time, for they haven't the cover we have. If we don't get aboard before the other comes up, they get the trick."

The nameless ship bounded forward into the night as he spoke, and, soon coming up with the helm a-starboard, she was not fifty yards away from her long opponent when the deadly steel storm began its havoc. For our part, the men had cover of a sort in the fore-top, and there were steel screens round the deck-guns; but when the cruiser replied with her own small arms many fell; and groans, and shrieks, and curses rose, and were audible even to us in the tower. Never have I known anything akin to that terrible episode when bullets rang upon our decks in hundreds, and the dead and the living in the other ship lay huddled together, in a seething, struggling, moaning mass. For she had little cover, being a cruiser, and we had opened fire upon her before such of her men as could be spared had got below.

"Let 'em digest that!" cried Black, as he watched the havoc, and puffed away with serene calmness amidst the stress of it all; "let 'em swallow lead, the vultures. I'd sink 'em with one shot if it wasn't for their oil; but they ain't alone!"

It was true, I, who had not ceased to watch that distant light which marked another war-ship on the horizon, knew that a second light had shone out as a star away over the sea; and now, when I looked again at his words, I saw a third light, but I had no courage to tell him of it. Indeed, we were being surrounded, and the danger was the greater for every minute of delay. The cruiser, although she suffered so grievously from the storm of lead which we rained upon her, had not hauled down her flag, and still replied to our fire, but more feebly. And the search-lights of the distant ships were clearer to my view every moment, so that I watched them alone at the last; and Black saw them, and took a sight from the glass. Then for the first time his cigar fell from his lips, and he muttered an exclamation which might have been one of fear.

"Boy," he said, "you should have told me of this. I see three lights, and that means a fleet of the devils to come. Well, I'll risk it, as I've risked it before. If I can stop 'em now with a shot, the game's ours; if she sinks, they trump us."

He gave a long order in careful words down through the tube to the turret; and, coming up to position, we fired at the cruiser for the last time, hitting her low down in the very centre of her engine-room. A great volume of steam gushed up from her deck, with clouds of smoke and fire; and as all shooting from her small arms ceased, we went out to the gallery, and the boats were cast free. A minute after, the ensign of the other was lowered, and we had beaten her.

"You, 'Four-Eyes,' take the launch, and get her oil," Black sang out at the sight; "You'll have five hands, that's all you want. Go sharp, if you'd save your skins!"

I stood on the gallery, and watched the passage of the small boat, which was at the side of the maimed cruiser almost in a moment. There was no longer any resistance to our men, for the hands of the other ship had too much work of their

own to do. I saw some running quickly to the aft boats, while some were bearing wounded from below, and others stood beneath the bridge taking orders from a very young officer, who had no colleagues in the work. Not that there was any confusion, only that awful crying of strong men in their agony, of the dying who feel death's hand upon them, of the wounded who had pain which was hardly to be endured. For a long time it seemed as though no one heard the hail of "Four-Eyes" to be taken aboard; and when at last we watched him get on deck, he met with no resistance, but did as he would. Under the spreading rays of our great arc you could follow the whole scene as though by day—the hurrying crowd of seamen, the work at the boat, the fear and terror of it all. And you could see at the last a sight which to Black had more import than anything else in that picture of distress and desolation.

The great ship began to heel right over. Her stern came high out of the water, so that her screws were visible. She dipped her bows clean under the breaking sea; and so she rode during some terrible minutes. Her own men now cast off their boats anyhow, leaving the wounded, who cursed, or implored, or prayed, or shrieked; but "Four-Eyes" did not come, and Black raved, looking away where the search-lights of the other ships now showed their rapid approach. To this extraordinary man it was the great cast of life. If the cruiser went down and his men got no oil, we should infallibly be taken by the warships then coming upon us; and I wonder not that in that moment he lost something of his old calm, pacing the bridge with nervous steps, and alternately cursing or imploring the men who could not hear.

"Why don't they come?" he asked desperately. "The lazy, loitering snails! What are they doing there? Do you see her heeling? She can't weather that list another five minutes. Dick! for God's sake signal to them—the creeping vermin! Ahoy, there! Do you hear me? You aboard, are you looking to live to-morrow, or will you lay a hundred fathoms under—look, boys! do you see them lights? They're warships, three of 'em! We've got to show 'em our heels, and we can't—we've no oil, not a gallon! And they're taking their ease like fine gentlemen aboard there—the guzzling swine—but I'll stir 'em! You Dick, fire a shot at 'em!"

Dick had just answered him, saying, "Ay, Captain, I'll gie him a wee bit o' iron in his gizzard," when his further words were broken on his lips, for our hands appeared at the ladder of the doomed steamer, and they tumbled into the launch anyhow, flying madly from her side as she plunged to a huge sea, and with one mighty roll went headlong under the surface of the Atlantic. At that moment day broke, and, as the silver light of the dawn spread over the dark of the sea, we saw three ironclads approaching us at all their speed, and then not three miles distant from us. But the launch was at our side, and as Black leant over, and the new light lit up his bloodshot eyes and haggard face, he asked, with hoarseness in his voice—

"Have ye got the oil?"

"Not a drop!" replied the cox.

The strong man reared himself straight up, and he turned to Karl, at his side. In that moment he was really great, and I shall never forget the nonchalance with which he drew another cigar from his case and lighted it. The two men, who had found their calm as the danger thickened, were in perfect accord; and, as one descended the ladder to the engine-room with slow steps, the other went again to the tower, where I followed him.

"Boy," he said, "I've often wondered how this old ship would break up; now we'll see, but she's going to bite some of 'em yet, if she can't last."

"Are you going to run for it?" I asked.

"Run for it, with two engines, yes; but it's a poor business. And we'll have to fight! Well, who knows? There's luck at sea as well as on shore. If I run, they'll catch me in ten miles; but we'll all do what we can. Now smoke and have a brandy-and-soda. You may not get another."

The drink I took, but his calm I could not share. If the nameless ship were trapped at last I had freedom; but of what sort? The freedom of a bloody fight, the lottery of life, the remote possibility that, the ship being taken, I should get to the shelter of the war-vessels. The man soon undeceived me on both points.

"If we're out-manceuvred and crippled in what's coming," said he, "I have given Karl my orders. This ship I've built and loved like a child isn't going to knuckle under to any man living. She's going to sink, lad, and we're all going to blazes with her! What's the odds? A man must die! Let him die on his own dunghill, say I, and a fig for the reckoning! We shall last out as long as we can, and then we'll let the cylinders till with hydrogen, and blow her up. But you're not smoking."

The threat, so jaunty yet so terrible, was almost like a sentence of death to me. I looked from the glass of the tower, and saw the foremost ironclad but two miles away from us, and the others were sweeping round to cut us off if we attempted flight. In the old days, with the nameless ship at the zenith of her power, we should have laughed at their best efforts—have flown from them as a bird from a trap. But we lay with but two engines working, and a speed of sixteen knots at the best. Nor did we know from minute to minute when another engine would break down.

At the beginning of this flight we almost held our own, shaping a curious course, which, if pursued, would have brought us ultimately to the Irish coast again. For some hours during the morning I thought that we gained slightly, and those following evidently felt that it would be a waste of shell to fire at us, for they were silent: only great volumes of smoke came from the funnels of the battleships, and we knew that their efforts to get greater speed were prodigious.

We ran in this state all the morning, our men silent and brooding; Black smoked cigar after cigar with a dogged assumption of indifference; the German came to us often with his desperate gestures and his woe-begone face. It was well on in the afternoon before the position changed in any way, and I had gone down with the Captain to the lower saloon to make the pretence of lunching. There we sat—"Four-Eyes" with us—a miserable trio, cracking jokes, and expressing desperate hopes; sending up the nigger every other moment to learn how the ironclad lay, and much comforted when at the fifth coming he said—

"You gain, sar, plenty sar; you run right away, sar."

"We do?" cried Black, who jumped from his seat and ran up the companion-way to confirm the tale, and he shouted down to us, "Crack another bottle, if it's the last, and give it to the nigger; we're leaving them!"

His elation was contagious. "Four-Eyes" awoke from his lethargy, and drank a pint of the wine at a draught. The nigger put out a glass with a satisfied leer. The Captain took a bottle and laid his hand on the cork. But there it stayed, for at that moment there came a horrible sound of grating and tearing from the engine-room, and it was succeeded by a moment of dead and chilling silence.

"The second engine's gone," said a man above, quite calmly, and we knew the worst, and went on deck again.

We found the crew sullen and muttering, but Friedrich, the engineer's eldest son, sat at the top of the engine-room ladder, and tears rolled down his face. The great ship still trembled under the shock of the breakdown and was not showing ten knots. The foremost ironclad crept up minute by minute; and before we had realised the whole extent of the mishap, she was within gunshot of us; but her colleagues were some miles away, she outpacing them all through it.

"Bedad, she signals to us to let her come aboard," said "Four-Eyes," who watched her intently.

"Answer that we'll see her in chips first," said Black, and he called for Karl and made signs to him.

"If so be as ye don't come to, he'll be about to fire upon ye," cried "Four-Eyes" again, who stood at the flag-line, and this time Black thought before he answered—

"Then parley with 'em ; we'll come alongside and hear their jaw."

There was a leer of positive devilry on his face as he said this, and he beckoned me into the conning-tower, when he closed the tower and bade me watch. Those on the battle-ship made quite sure of us now, for they steamed on and came within three hundred yards of us. Black watched them as a beast watches the unsuspecting prey. He stood, his face knit in savage lines, his hand upon the bell. I looked from the glass, and saw that no man was visible upon our decks, that our engines had ceased to move. We were motionless. Then in a second the bells rang out. There was again that frightful grating and tearing in the engine-room. The nameless ship came round to her helm with a mighty sweep : she foamed and plunged in the seas ; she turned her ram straight at the other ; and, groaning as a great stricken wounded beast, she roared onward to the voyage of death. I knew then the fearful truth : Black meant to sink the cruiser with his ram. I shall never forget that moment of terror, that grinding of heated steel, that plunge into the seas. Holding with all my strength to the seat of the tower, I waited for the crash, and in the suspense hours seemed to pass. At last, there was under the sea a mighty clap as of submarine thunder. Dashed headlong from my post, I lay bruised and wounded upon the floor of steel. The roof above me rocked ; the walls shook and were bent ; my ears rang with the deafening roar in them ; seas of foam mounted before the glass ; shrieks and the sound of awful rending and tearing drowned other shouts of men going to their death. And through all was the hysterical yelling of Black, his cursing, his defiance, his elation.

"Come and see," he roared, dragging me by the collar to the gallery ; "come and see. They sink, the lubbers ! They go to blazes every one of them. Look at their faces, the crawling scum. Ha ! ha ! Die, you vermin ! as you meant me to die ; fill your skins with water, you sharks ! I spit on you ! Boys, do you hear them crying to you ? Music, fine music ! Who'll dance when the devil plays ? Dance, you lazy blacklegs ; dance on nothing ! Ha, ha !"

No man has ever looked on a more awful sight. We had struck the battle-ship low amidships—we had crashed through the thinnest coat of her steel. She had heeled right over from the shock, so that the guns had cast free from the carriages, and the sea had filled her. Thus for one terrible minute she lay, her men crowding upon her starboard side, or jumping into the sea, or making desperate attempts to get her boats free ; and then, with a heavy lurch, she rolled beneath the waves ; and there was left but thirty or forty struggling souls, who battled for their lives with the great rollers of the Atlantic. Of these a few reached the side of our ship and were shot there as they clung to the ladder ; a few swam strongly in the desperate hope that the brutes about me would relent, and sank at last with piercing and piteous cries upon their lips ; others died quickly, calling upon God as they went to their rest.

For ourselves we lay, our bows split with the shock, our engine-room in fearful disorder, our men drunk with ferocity and with despair. The other warships were yet some distance away ; but they opened fire upon us at hazard, and, of the first three shells which fell, two cut our decks ; and sent clouds of splinters, of wood, and of human flesh flying in the smoke-laden air. At the fifth shot, a gigantic crash resounded from below, and the stokers rushed above with the news that the fore stoke-hold had three feet of water in it. The hands received the news with a deep groan ; then with curses and recriminations. They bellowed like bulls at Black ; they refused all orders. He shot down man after man, while I crouched for safety in the tower ; and they became but fiercer. Our end was evidently near ; and, knowing this, they fell upon the liquor, and were worse than fiends. Anon they turned upon the captain and myself, and fired volleys upon the conning-tower ; or, in their terrible frenzy, they pitched themselves into the sea, or raved with drunken songs, and vented their vengeance upon the Irishman, "Four-Eyes," chasing him

wildly, and stabbing him with many cuts, so that he dropped dying at our door, with no more reproach than the simple words—

"God help me! but had I died in me own country I would have known more pace."

Through all this our one engine worked; and so slowly did the great ironclad draw upon us that the end of it all came before they could reach us. Suddenly the men rushed to the boats and cast them loose. Fighting with the dash of madmen, they crowded the launch, they swarmed the jolly-boat and the life-boat. Even the engineer's son felt the touch of contagion, and joined the *mêlée*. We watched their insane efforts as boat after boat put away and was swamped, leaving the devilish men to drown as the worthier fellows had drowned before them; and amongst the last to die was "Dick the Ranter," who went down with blasphemies gurgling upon his lips. When six o'clock came, Black and Karl and myself were alone upon the great ship; and in the stillness which followed there came another weird and wild and soul-stirring shriek—the cry of the dumb engineer, who found speech in the great catastrophe. Then Black pulled me by the arm and said—

"Boy, they've left nothing but the dinghy. The old ship's done; and it's time you left her."

"And you?" I asked.

He looked at me and at Karl. He had meant to die with the ship, I knew; but the old magnetism of my presence held him again in that hour. He followed me slowly, as one in a dream, to the davits aft, and freed the last of the boats, overlooked by the hands in their frenzy and their panic. Then he went to his cabin, and to the rooms below; and I helped him to put a couple of kegs of water in the frail craft, with some biscuit, which we lashed, and a case of wine which he insisted on.

The preparation cost us half-an-hour of time, and when all was ready, the captain went to the engine-room and brought Karl to the top of the ladder; but there the German stayed, nor did threats or entreaties move him.

"He'll die with the ship," said Black, "and I don't know that he isn't wise;" but he held out his hand to the genius of his crime, and after a great grip the two men parted.

For ourselves, we stepped on the frailest craft with which men ever faced the Atlantic, and at that moment the first of the ironclads fired another shell at the nameless ship. It was a crashing shot, but it had come too late to serve justice, or to wreck the ship of mystery; for Karl had let the hydrogen into the cylinders unchecked, and with a mighty rush of flame, and a terrific explosion, the craft of gold gave her "Vale!" And in a cascade of fire, lighting the sea for many miles, and making as day the newly-fallen night, the golden citadel hissed over the water for one moment, then plunged headlong, and was no more.

A fierce fire it was, lighting sea and sky—a mighty holocaust; the roar of a great conflagration; the end of a monstrous dream. And I thought of another fire and another face—the face of Martin Hall, who had seen the finger of Almighty God in his mission; and I said, "His work is done!"

But Black, clinging to the dinghy, wept as a man stricken with a great grief, and he cried so that the coldest heart might have been moved—

"My ship, my ship! Oh God, my ship!"

CHAPTER XXVL

A PAGE IN BLACK'S LIFE.

I KNOW not whether it was the amazing spectacle of the nameless ship's end, or the sudden coming down of night, that kept attention from our boat when the great vessel had sunk; but those on the ironclads, which were at least two miles from us when we put off, seemed to be unaware that any boat from the ship lived; and, although they steamed for some hours in our vicinity, they saw nothing of us as we lay in the plunging dinghy. When night fell, and with it what breeze that had been blowing, we lost sight of them altogether, and knew for the first time the whole terror of the situation. Black had indeed recovered much of his old calm, and drank long draughts of champagne; but he sat silent, and uttered no word for many hours after the end of that citadel which had given him such great power. As for the little boat, it was a puny protection against the sweeping rollers of the Atlantic, and I doubt not that we had been drowned that very night if a storm of any moment had broken upon us.

About midnight a thunderstorm got up from the south, and the sea, rising somewhat with it, wetted us to the skin. The lightning, terribly vivid and incessant, lighted up the whole sea again and again, showing each the other's face, the face of a sworn and fatigue-stricken man. And the rain and the sea beat on us until we shivered, cowering, and were numbed; our hands stiffened with the salt upon them, so that we could scarce get the warming liquor to our lips. Yet Black held to his silence, moaning at rare intervals as he had moaned when the great ship sank. It was not until the sun rose over the long swell that we slept for an hour or more; and after sleep we were both calmer, looking for ships with much expectation, and that longing which the derelict only may know. The Captain was then very quiet, and he gazed often at me with the expression I had seen on his face when he saved me from his men.

"Boy," he said, "look well at the sun, lest you never look at it again."

"I am looking," I replied; "it is life to me."

"If," he continued, very thoughtful, "you, who have years with you, should live when I go under, you'll take this belt I'm wearing off me; it'll help you ashore. If it happen that I live with you, it'll help both of us."

"We're in the track of steamers," said I; "there's no reason to look at it that way yet. Please God, we'll be seen."

"That's your way, and the right one," he answered; "but I'm not a man like that, and my heart's gone with my ship: we shall never see her like again."

"You built her?" I said questioningly.

"Yes," he responded, "I built her when I put my hand against the world, and, if it happened to me to go through it again, I'd do the same."

"What did you go through?" I asked, as he passed me the biscuits and the cup with liquor in it, and as he sat up in the raft I saw that the man had death written on his face.

But at that time he told me nothing in answer to my question; and sat for many hours motionless, his glassy eyes fixed upon the bottom of the boat. In the afternoon, however, he suddenly sat up, and took up his thread as if he had broken it but a minute before.

"I went through much," said he, gazing over the mirror-like surface of the trackless water-desert, "as boy and man. I lived a life which was hell; God knows it."

I did not press him to tell me more, for in truth I shivered so, and was so numbed that even my curiosity to know of this life of crime and of mystery was not so paramount as to banish that other thought: Shall we live when the sun sinks this night? But he found relief in his talk, and, as the liquor warmed him, he continued faster than before--

"I was a stepson, boy ; bound to a brute with not as much conscience as a big dog, and no more human nature in him than a wild bull. My mother died three months after he took her, and I'm not going to speak about her, God help me ; but if I had the man under my hands that treated her so, I'd crush his skull like I crush this biscuit. Well ; that ain't my tale ; you ask me what I went through, and I'm trying to tell you. Have you ever wanted a meal ? No, I reckon not ; and you can't get it in your mind, to know what living on bones and bits for more than a couple of years means, can you, as I lived down in my home at Glasgow, and often since out West and at Colorado ? I'd come out from Scotland as a bit of a lad not turned thirteen, and I sailed aboard the *Savannah City* to Montreal, and then to Rio, and in Japan waters ; and for three years, until I deserted at 'Frisco, no devilry that human fiends could think of was unknown to me. But they made a sailor of me ; and full-rigged ship or steamer I'd navigate with the best of 'em. After that, I went aboard a brig plying between 'Frisco and Yokohama, and there I picked up much, leaving her after two years to get across to Europe, and do the ocean trade with the Jackson line between Southampton and Buenos Ayres. It was in that city I met my wife. I married her in Mendoza ; for she came of rich folk, who spat on me, and was only a bit of a girl who'd never wanted a comfort on this earth until that time, and who starved with me then and for years. My God ! my whole body burns when I think of it—that bit of a creature who'd never known the lack of a gratification and who was dragged down to every degradation by my curse."

I looked at him in surprise, and he answered me instinctively.

"Yes, by my curse. Maybe you don't know what it was, for I've held it under a bit since she died, but I was a drunkard then—a maniac when I had the liquor on me, a devil from whom all men fled. Not that there isn't work for any man in that country—work, and well paid—but I had the fever on me, and,—well, we sank very low. How I lived I can't tell you ; but after a couple of years of it I worked a passage to New York, and there my son was born. When he grew up he was the very image of you. That's why I gave you your life when you came on my ship."

The words were spoken in that gentle voice he could command sometimes, and, as he uttered them, he took my hand and gave it a great grip. I understood then that curious look he had given me at our first meeting ; his partisanship for me against the men ; and that last great risk which had brought the end of it all, if it had not brought death to both of us. Somewhere down in that human well of crime and ferocity there was a spring of purer water. I had set it free when I brought old memories to him, and I owed it to him that amazing chance that I lived through the frenzies of Ice-haven.

"Yes," said Black, observing my surprise, and passing me the liquor which he compelled me to drink ; "my boy was your height, and your build, and he had your eyes. What's more, he had your grit, and there was no cooler hand living. Not that he owed much to me, for I was mad drunk half his life ; and, when sober, I lived as often as not in prison for what I had done in liquor. It was when he was nearly twenty that the change came ; for he began to bring home money, do you see ? and what with his work and the way he talked to me, I set myself to get the craving under ; and I was a new man in one year, and in two my brain came back to me, and I made the discovery that I was not born a fool. You may reckon I worshipped the lad ! God knows, he and his mother did for me more than man or woman ever did for a breathing body. And when my wits came back to me, and I thought what I might have done, and what I had done, and that my boy had borne it all only to drag me to my reason at last, I could have ended it there and then. Maybe I should have done it if a new turn hadn't come in my life's road. It was when I was at my lowest, and we were sore put to it to get food in New York, that I was taken up by a man who was going to Michigan seeking copper. My lad was then working with a Mike Leveston in the city—a land-agent for the up-country work, and the owner of a line of small brigs running between Boston and the Bahamas ; but times had gone bad with him, and the boy, who had been getting good money, found himself with no more than enough to keep him, let alone his mother. Well, I thought the

thing out, and, as my partner had some capital and agreed to let me have ten dollars a week any way, I made an agreement with Leveston that he should allow the wife and the boy enough to live on for six months, and I set out for the State where the copper find was beginning to attract notice, and in a year I was a made man. We found the ore as thick as clay, and, under the excitement of it, I kept my head, and the drink craze never touched me. When the money came in, I made Leveston my New York agent, and sent him enough to set up the woman who'd stood by me all through in more luxury than she'd known since she married me. For a while her letters told me of her new life, and I kept them under my shirt as I would have kept leaves of gold. In the spring, I sent the agent twenty thousand dollars for her; and I got his acknowledgment, saying she'd gone down to Charleston to see about the boy's work there, and I should hear from her on her return.

"I think this was about eighteen months after I left New York, and from that time my wife ceased to write to me, and I heard nothing more from the lad. We'd been doing such work in the mine that we had enough money to pay our way for life, and we hoped to make an almighty pile before many years had gone; but I couldn't bear not hearing from them as I worked for, and in the fall of the year I went back to New York—under protest from my partner, who could do nothing without me—and I never rested until I reached my house in Fifty-Fourth Street. I found it shut up, the furniture gone, not a sign of living being in it; and when I went to make inquiries amongst my neighbours, they told me what came to this. My wife had died of starvation—nothing less, boy, for the devil I'd sent the money to had doled out to her and the lad a few dollars for the first year, but had cut and run when the big sums reached him; and he took the boy with him on the pretence of a job in the Southern city. My son, you see, had turned naturally to architect's work, and was induced by this long-toothed vulture to quit New York, because they heard from the mine that I was dead—that I died, as Leveston had told them, of small-pox—and left not a shilling for them. God! if only I could bring him to life to clutch his cursed throat again!"

"But what became of your son?" I asked, as he ceased speaking, and we lay riding gently over the long rollers, with a great flood of sunlight making the sea as a sheen of beaten gold, touched with diamond points where the spray broke. Then he went on with it; but you could see some awful emotion moving him, and he kept plying himself with drink, which made his words the fiercer.

"What became of the boy?" he repeated after me. "Why, he went south in the hope of sending money to his mother; and directly he reached Charleston, Leveston shipped him on a brig, knowing that I must hear of his doings in a month or more. He sent the lad to Panama, and there he died, one of the first to be stricken in the fever land. They buried him in the country, as the Lord is my witness. Then I came home—rich, my trunks stuffed with notes, able, if I cared, to buy up half the land-agents in New York City; and the money I'd got seemed to turn black in my hands when I found that those it was made for needed it no more. Not as I knew then of the lad's death—that I was to hear of later; but, free from the drink, I had loved the woman who was gone; and I was a madman for days and weeks. When I got my head again I changed as I don't believe any man ever changed before; there was something in my mind which I could not cope with. I can't lay it down any clearer than this: it was a hatred of all men that took possession of me—a fierce desire to make mankind pay for the wrongs I had suffered. I gave myself up to the drink again, but not as I did when they named me a drunkard. This time I was the master of it; I used it for my purpose; I fed my thoughts of vengeance on it; and, while my partner was sending me more than a thousand pounds a week from Michigan, I remained in New York with the double purpose in my head—to get my boy back to me, and to crush the life out of the man who had left my wife to die.

"All the news I could get at that time was this: the boy had left Charleston, ostensibly for the Bahamas, three months before I reached New York City; but nothing more had been heard of him or the ship. I put the best detectives in the city on Leveston's trail, raining the money into their pockets to keep them to the

work; and they got it out of some of Leveston's seamen in Savannah that he had gone a long cruise in one of his barques to Rio, and even farther south. This news was like red-hot iron to my head. I knew that I couldn't touch the man by law, except for the robbery of the bit of money, and *that* I didn't care a brass button about. What I meant to have was his life, and I swore that no man should take it but me. Then I went into every low haunt in New York. I searched the drinking dens of the Bowery; I made friends with all the thieves, picked up the loafers, and the starving. The parson who's gone I found running a gambling hell in New Jersey; the man 'Four-Eyes' I took from a crimp at Boston; John we got later on at Rio, where we bought him from the police. I had as fine a crew of scoundrels in a month as ever cursed in a fo'castle; and I shipped them all on the screw-steamer, *Rossa*, which I bought for six thousand pounds from the Rossa Company. She was just on six hundred tons, an iron boat built for the meat trade; but we knocked her about quick enough, setting three machine-guns forward, and fifty Winchester rifles among her stores. We put out from Sandy Hook, it must be nearly six years ago; and we steamed straight ahead for Rio, where we got tidings of Leveston's barque. She had sailed for Buenos Ayres, but they looked for her return within the month, and we left again next day, cruising near shore as far as Desterro, where luck was with us.

"I remember that morning as if it was yesterday. We had struck eight-bells, and the men were going down to dinner, when the mate sighted a ship on the port-bow. We put straight out to sea at the hail, and within half-an-hour we stood alongside her; and the man who answered my call was Mike Leveston. When he saw me hailing him from the poop of a steamer, he turned green as the sea about him; and he yelled to me to stand off if I didn't want a bullet in me. The sight of him maddened me; I turned the machine-gun on his decks, and swept them clear as a grass field, but he lay flat on his face by the taffrail, and he bellowed for mercy like a woman. And he got it. I ran the steamer alongside him, smashing in his quarter, and when we had gripped, I got aboard. Then he grovelled at my feet, and, as I held my pistol at his head, he gabbed out the news that my son was dead—told me that he died at Panama, and he screamed for mercy like a hog at the block. But I cut his throat from ear to ear with my own knife, and I threw his body to the sharks limb by limb as you would throw a dead sheep to the dogs. God knows, I was mad then, as I have been often since, and am now. My poor son!"

"The man told you the truth, then?"

"Yes. When I had made chips of his ship I went back to Panama, and there got news of the boy. They had buried him at Porto Bello, and I stopped there long enough to make his grave decent, and then returned up the coast to New York. Coming back, the vermin with me took a fancy on the third day out, when three parts of them were drunk, to do with a strange brig as they had done with Leveston's. They stopped her with the guns, and cleared her of every dollar aboard, sending her to the bottom out of pure devilry. I didn't stop 'em; for I had the madness of the drink on me again, and I led 'em at the work then, and when they sent a dozen more coasters after the two that had gone on the voyage to Sandy Hook. By the time we were in New York again, I had got a taste for the new work which nothing could cure. It seemed as if I was to revenge on mankind the wrong I had suffered from one man; and, more than that, I saw there was money in heaps in it. They said at home that piracy was played out, but I asked myself, 'How's that? Give me a ship big enough,' said I, 'and under certain conditions I'll sweep the Atlantic.' There was danger enough in the job, and it was big enough to tempt that curious brain of mine, which had always dreamed of big jobs since I'd been a bit of a boy, and I was fascinated with this big idea until I couldn't hold myself. That's what led me to keep the crew together at New York, and to return to Michigan, where I found that the mine was making money faster almost than they could bank it, and if I was worth a penny, I was worth a million sterling at that very time; for my partner behaved square all through, and paid my share to the last penny. I stayed with him about a couple of months then, giving my wits to the job, and it was there

I met Karl, the German engineer, who had got it into his head that gas was the motor of the near future. He talked of using it for the copper work, and then of building gas launches for transport; but he didn't know that he'd set me all aglow with another thought, which was nothing less than this—that I should build a steamer driven by gas, and run a game of piracy on the Atlantic with her. Do you call it lunacy? Well, other men have made good company for such lunatics, the Corsican murderer at Moscow among 'em. And what was it to be but a fight of one man against the world—a fight to set your best blood running fast in your veins, to brace every nerve in your body? Boy, I lived for a year on that excitement, which was more even than the drink to me. I left the mine to cruise again in the *Rossa* with the old hands; but we had added a long 'chaser' to our list of guns, and in the three months out we took twenty ships and over two hundred thousand in specie. I saw from the beginning of it that the one thing we couldn't stand against with a coal steamer was the constant putting into port to fill her bunkers; and I knew that if we didn't find some haven of refuge out of the common run, the day would come when we should swing like common cut-throats. I had taken Karl on board with me for the trip, and he was the man to set both things square. He ran me north of Godthaab, in Greenland, and put me into the fjord you have known; and he drew the plans of my ship, which I made the Italians at Spezia build for me—for I had the money, and, as for the metal, the phosphor bronze of which I built her—well, that was Karl's idea, too. You may know that phosphor bronze is the finest material for ship-building in the world, but the majority of 'em can't use it on account of the cost of the copper. Well, the copper I had, any amount of it; and I shipped it to Italy, and the great vessel which your friend Hall thought was all of gold had the look of it, and was the finest sight man ever saw when under her own colours.

"Once the ship was built, our game was easy. She was armoured heavily amidships; she had two ten-inch guns in her turrets, and machine-guns thick all over her; and she was the best-fitted ship in her quarters swimming. It's a rum thing, but I always had a bit of a taste for nice things—fine painting, gold work, and stones—and my only hobby to speak of has been the buying of 'em. This led me to meet your friend Hall. Not that I didn't know him from the first, for my men saw him in the yards at Spezia, and from that day I never left him unwatched. I followed him to Paris, to Liverpool, to London, when I was ashore; but I never brought my ship within a hundred miles of any port: and I used to hire yachts and sink 'em in mid-ocean when I wanted to reach her. Your friend would be alive now if he hadn't sought to find out where I got to when I left port in the *La France*. But I took him aboard to end him, and they shot him off the Needles and lashed him to the shrouds of the yacht when we fired her. He was a brave man, and indirectly he brought me to this—him and you—"

"And the justice of God," I said, thinking hatred towards him again as I remembered Hall's death.

"Perhaps," he answered, "but you know my history; and what's done can't be undone. Yet I say again that, if my son was alive, and was taken from me as he was taken seven years ago in Panama, I'd do what I did, though they burnt me alive for it. I've been agen Europe, and I've licked 'em, by Heaven; for what they've took is only my ship, and agen that I've a million of their money to put. One man with his hand agen the world's a fine sight, and what I've claimed I've done. Is piracy not worth a cent? Is it played out, do you tell me? I reckon them as says it lies. Give me a ship like mine that can show 'em twenty-nine knots; give me the harbour to coal once in six months; and I'll live against the lot of them, fight 'em one by one, rule this ocean more sure than any man ruled a people. I say I'd do it; I should have said I could have done it, for it's over now, and the day's gone. Before another twenty-four hours you'll be alone in this dinghy, boy. I've death on me, and I wouldn't live without the ship; no, I'll go under as she went under—the Lord have mercy on me!"

The firmness of the captain was near to leaving him in that moment, but he

palled himself together with a great effort, and sat aft, sculling with the shon in a mechanical and altogether absent way. The long talk with me about his ^{pass} had exhausted him, I thought; and he did not seem disposed to speak again. It was then near mid-day, and the sun, being right above us, poured down an intolerable heat, so that the paint of the dinghy was hot to the hand, and we ourselves were consumed with an unquenchable thirst. Nor could I restrain myself, but drank long draughts from the water-kegs, while Black kept to liquor; and was, I saw with fear, rapidly working himself up to a state of intoxication. You may ask if the terrors of the position came home to us thoroughly in that long day when we rode in a bit of a cockle-shell on the sweeping rollers of the Atlantic, but I answer you, I do not think that they did. The fear of such a position is the after-recollection of it. We were in a sense numbed to mental apprehension by the vigour of the physical suffering we endured, by that overwhelming thirst, by the devouring heat, by the cutting spray which drove upon our faces, by the stiffening of our clothes when the sun scorched them. Soaked in the brine one hour, we were nigh burnt up the next; and yet we knew that water would soon fail us—that we could not hope for life for many days unless we should sight some ship, and she in turn should sight us.

It is, perhaps, only in a small boat that one appreciates the magnitude of an Atlantic wave, even when the ocean seems comparatively still. Sometimes on a steamer's deck, when there is heavy wind and the sea is driven before it, you may watch a huge roller sweeping the great vessel as a pond wave will sweep a match; but at any time from a boat, which is, as it were, right down upon the water, you cannot fail to be impressed by the onward flow of those mighty translucent billows, which rush forward in their course and thunder at last upon the granite rocks of the western face of Europe. High above you in one moment as hills of emerald and silver, you wait with nerves all braced up as they come upon you, giving promise that you will be engulfed in the liquid bosom of the towering mountain; and you breathe again as your boat is taken in their swift embrace, and you are borne far above the darker ravine of the sea to a pinnacle of spreading foam, whence you may look to the distant horizon in that search for other ships; which may be pastime, or may be, as in our case, a search on which your very life depends.

How often during that long afternoon, when my hair was matted with the salt of the spray, and my hands were burnt with a consuming fire, and my body was chill or hot with the fever of the long exposure, did I, from such a pinnacle, cast my eyes around the foam-decked waste, and finding it all barren, feel my heart sink as the dinghy swept again into the dark-green abyss, and all around me were the walls of water! How many prayers did not I send up in the silence of my heart; how many thoughts of Roderick and of Mary, how many farewells to them! And when I prayed for life, and no answer seemed to come, and I remembered the years that might have been before me—years now to be unknown in the silence of the grave—I had a great bitterness against all fate and all men, and I crouched in the boat with my suffering heavy upon me. But Black continued to drink, and when the sun fell low in the west, and the whole heavens were as mountains and peaks of the crimson fire, I know by his mutterings that the frenzy of the old madness was upon him.

At one time he called upon his wife, I doubt not, and gave mad words of self-reproach and of regret. And then he would mutter of his son, as though the lad could help him; and many times he cried out: "My God! the ship's going—hands, lower boats!" Or he raved with fierce threats and awful cries at the American he had buried, or made desperate appeals to some apparition that came to him in his dreadful dream. But at the last he grew almost incoherent, thinking that I was the dead lad; and he set himself wildly to chafe my hands, and put spirit at my lips. I was then nigh dead with want of sleep and fatigue, for I had not rested during the fight with the ironclads; and when he covered me with the small tarpaulin, and made a rough pillow in the bow, I went to sleep almost at once; and was as one drunk with the torpor of the rest.

I must be during that long night I must have roused myself. I recall well a heaven of stars, and a moonlit sea glowing with the pale light; while looking down upon me were the eyes of a madman, who clutched the sides of the dinghy with trembling and claw-like hands, and had a scream upon his lips. And again at the second time I looked upward to behold a faint break of grey in the leaden sky, and to feel warm raindrops beating upon me. But I heard no sound, and scarce turning in my heaviness, I slept again; and all through my sleep I dreamed that there was the echo of a voice, as of the voice of the damned, calling to me from the sea, and that, though I would have helped the man whose hand was above the waters, I could not move, for an iron grip, as the grip of Fate, held me to my place.

When I awoke for the third time, the dinghy was held firmly by a boat-hook, and was being drawn towards a jolly-boat full of seamen. I rose up, rubbing my eyes as a man seeing a vision; but, when the men shouted something to me in German, I had another exclamation on my lips; for I was alone in the boat, and Black had left me.

Then I looked across the sea, and I saw a long black steamer lying to a mile away, and the men dragged me into their craft, and shouted hearty words of encouragement, and they put liquor to my lips, and fell to rowing with great joy. Yet I remembered my dream, and it seemed to me that the voice I had heard in my sleep was the voice of Black, who cried to me as he had cast himself to his death in the Atlantic.

* * * * *

Was the man dead? Had he really ended that most remarkable life of evil enterprise and of crime; or had he by some miracle found safety while I slept? As the Germans rowed me quickly towards their steamer, and comforted me as one would comfort a child that is found destitute by the wayside, I turned this thought over again and again in my mind. Had the man gone out of my life wrapped in the mystery which had surrounded him from the first? Did he still live to dream dreams of vengeance and of robbery? Or had he simply cast himself from the dinghy in a fit of insanity, and died the terrible death of the suicide? I could not answer the tremendous question; had no clue to it; but I had not reached the shelter of the steamer which had saved me before I made the discovery that the belt of linen which had been about Black's waist was now about mine, tied firmly with a sailor's knot, and when I put my hand upon the linen I found that it was filled with some hard and sharp stones, which had all the feel of pebbles. Instinctively I knew the truth: that in his last hour the master of the nameless ship had retained his curious affection for me; had made over to me some of that huge hoard of wealth he must have accumulated by his years of pillage; and I restrained myself with difficulty from casting the whole there and then into the waters which had witnessed his battles for it. But the belt was firmly lashed about me, and we were on the deck of the steamer before my benumbed hands could set the lashing free.

It would be idle for me to attempt to describe to you all I felt as the captain of the steamship *Hoffnung* greeted me upon his quarterdeck, and his men sent up rounds of cheers which echoed over the waters. I stood for some minutes forgetful of everything, save that I had been snatched from that prison of steel; brought from the shadow of the living death to the hope of seeing friends, and country, and home again. Now one man wrung my hand, now another brought clothes, now another hot food; but I stood as one stricken dumb, holding nervously to the taffrail as though none should drag me down again to the horrors of the dinghy, or to that terrible loneliness which had hung over my life for so many weeks. And then there came a great reaction, an overpowering weakness, a great sense of thankfulness, and tears gushed up in my eyes, and fell upon my numbed hands. The good fellows about me, whose German was for the most part unintelligible to me, appreciated well the condition in which I was; and, with many encouraging pats on the back, they forced me down their companion way to the skipper's cabin, and so to a bunk, where I lay inanimate, and deep in sleep for many hours. But I awoke as another

man, and when I had taken ^{of} it to return to me with bounds, and I sat up to find but that the belt which Black had bound about me lay at the was unopened.

For some minutes I held this belt in my hand with a curious and uneasy hesitation. It was not heavy, being all of linen finely sewed; but when at last I made up my mind to open it, I did so with my teeth, tearing the threads at the top of it, and so ripping it down. The action was followed by a curious result, for as I opened the seams there fell upon my bed some twenty or thirty diamonds of such size and such lustre that they lay sparkling with a thousand lights which dazzled the eyes, and made me utter a cry at once of surprise and of admiration. White stones they were, Brazilian diamonds of the first water; and when I undid the rest of the seam, and opened the belt fully, I found at least fifty more, with some superb black pearls, a fine emerald, and a little parcel of exquisite rubies. To the latter there was attached a paper with the words, "My son, for as such I regard you, take these; they are honestly come by. And let me write while I can that I have loved you before God. Remember this when you forget Captain Black."

That was all; and I judged that the stones were worth five thousand pounds if they were worth a penny. I could scarce realise it all as I read the note again and again, and handled the sparkling, glittering baubles, which made my bunk a cave of dazzling light; or wrapped them once more in the linen, using it as a bag, and tying it round my neck for safety. It seemed indeed that I had come to riches as I had come again to freedom; and in the strange bewilderment of it all, I dressed myself in the rough clothes which the skipper had sent to me, and bounded on deck to greet a glorious day and the fresh awakening breezes of the sun-lit Atlantic. It was difficult to believe that there was not a reckoning yet to come; that the nameless ship had gone to her doom. Had I in reality escaped the terrors of the dinghy? This question I asked myself again and again as the soft wind fanned my face; and I went to the bulwarks, looking away where soon we should sight the Scillies, while the honest fellows crowded round me, and showered every kindness upon me. Yet for days and weeks after that, even now sometimes when I am amongst my own again, I wake in my sleep with troubled cries, and the dark gives me back the life which was my long night of suffering.

The *Hoffnung* was bound for Königsberg, but when the skipper and I had come to understand each other by signs and writing, he, with great consideration, offered to put into Southampton and leave me there. This took a great weight from my mind, for I was burning with anxiety to hear of my friends again; and when we entered the Channel on the third night, I found sleep far from my eyes, and paced the deck until dawn broke. We dropped anchor off Southampton at three in the afternoon, and when I had insisted on Captain Wolfram taking one of my diamonds as a souvenir for himself, and one to sell for the crew, I put off in his long-boat with a deep sense of his humanity and kindness, and with hearty cheers from his crew.

I should have gone to the quay at once then, but crossing the roads I saw a yacht at anchor, and I recognised her as my own yacht *Celsis*, with Dan pacing her poop. To put to her side was the work of a moment, and I do not think that I ever gave a heartier hail than that "Ahoy, Daniel!" which then fell from my lips.

"Ahoy!" cried Dan in reply, "not as it oughtn't to be Daniel, but with no disrespect to the other gent—why, blister my foretop, if it ain't the guv'nor!"

And the old fellow began to shout and to wave his arms and to throw ropes about as though he were smitten with lunacy.

I must be during that long night I must have roused myself. The stars, and a moonlit sea glowed. AFTER XXVII.
 me were the eyes of a man and claw-like hands, and I fell to wondering.

I looked up at the ladder, which was always at the side of the *Celsis*, before Dan had gathered his scattered wits to remember that it was there. It was worth much to watch that honest fellow as he gripped my hand in his two great paws; and then let it go to walk away, and survey me at a distance; or drew nearer again, and seemed to wish to give me a great hug as a bear hugs its cub. But I cut him short with a gesture, and asked him if Roderick and Mary were aboard.

"They're down below, as I'm alive, and the hands is ashore, but they'll come aboard for this, drunk or sober. Thunder! if I was ten year younger—but there, I ain't, and you'll be waking 'em; do you see, they're resting after victuals down in the saloon. Shall I tell 'em as you've called in passing like? Lord, I can hardly see out of my eyes for looking at you, sir."

Poor old Dan did not quite know what he was doing. I left him in the midst of his strange talk, and walked softly down the companion way to the door of the saloon, and I opened it and stood, I doubt not, before them as one come from the dead. Mary, whose childish face looked very drawn, was sitting before a book, open upon the table, her head resting upon her hands, and a strange expression of melancholy in her great dark eyes. But Roderick lay upon a sofa-bunk, and was fast asleep, with the novel which he had been reading lying crumpled upon the floor.

I had opened the door so gently that neither of them moved as I entered the room. It was to me the best moment of my life to be looking again upon them, and I waited for one minute till Mary raised her head, and our eyes met. Then I bent over the cabin table and kissed her, and I felt her clinging to me, and though she never spoke, her eyes were wet with hot tears; and when she smiled through them, it was as a glimpse of bright sunlight shining through a rain-shower. In another moment there was nothing but the expression of a great childish joy on her face, and the old Mary spoke.

"Mark, I can't believe it," she said, holding me close lest I might go away again "and I always guessed you'd come."

But Roderick awoke with a yawn, and when he saw me he rubbed his eyes, and said as one in a dream—

"Oh, is that you?"

The tea which Mary made was very fragrant, and Roderick's cigars had a fine rich flavour of their own, to which we did justice, as we sat long that afternoon, and I told of the days in Ice-haven. It was a long story, as you know, and I could but give them the outline of it, or, in turn, hear but a tenth part of their own anxieties and ceaseless efforts in my behalf. It appeared that when I had failed to return to the hotel on that night when I followed Paolo to the den in the Bowery, Roderick had gone at once to the yacht, and there had learnt from Dan of my intention. He did not lose an instant in seeking the aid of the police, but I was even then astern of the *Labrador*, and the keen search which the New York detectives had made was fruitless even in gleaning any tidings of me. Paolo was followed night and day for twenty-four hours; but he was shot in a drinking-den before the detectives laid hands on him, and lived long enough only to send Mary a message, telling her that her pretty eyes had saved the *Celsis* from disaster in the Atlantic. On the next day both the skipper and Roderick made public all they knew of Black and his crew, and a greater sensation was never made in any city. The news was cabled to Europe over half-a-dozen wires, was hurried to the Pacific, to Japanese seas—it shook the navies of the world with an excitement rarely known, and for some weeks it paralysed all traffic on the Atlantic. Cruisers of many nations were sent in the course of the great ocean-going steamers; arms

